

Try Me

The Demon Underground Series

Parker Blue

Book One: Bite Me

Book Two: Try Me

Book Three: Fang Me (March 2011)

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a Demon Underground novel

parker blue

Bite Me

Don't call her Buffy.
Unless you're ready to meet her inner demon.

Bite Me

CHAPTER ONE

The stench of rotting garbage filled my nostrils as I scoured the dark streets of San Antonio for something to take the edge off. I definitely needed it—this was one of those nights where I felt less than human. No reason, really, except tomorrow was my eighteenth birthday, and tonight, everyone else my age was having a good old time at Homecoming, watching a stupid football game and going to some lame dance.

But not me—no, the home-schooled freak wasn't invited. Not that I cared. They had no idea what went on in the real world, no idea what horrors prowled the night streets. Horrors like me.

A stifled cry came from a dark alley to my right. It sounded promising, so I checked it out. Sure enough, some dude had a young Emo punk pinned against the brick wall, his head buried in the kid's neck. Either they were indulging in some heavy necking, or a vampire was having an evening snack.

Given the wide-eyed fear in the kid's eyes, I was betting on the latter. Either way, he was going to have one serious hickey tomorrow morning.

I stepped up to the vamp and tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me?"

He whipped around, looking shocked, fangs gleaming in the meager light. "Looking for trouble, little girl?" he growled.

I grinned. It had been a long time since anyone had made the mistake of calling me a little girl. "As a matter of fact, yeah. You up for it?"

The kid whimpered. The guy let go of him and I stepped back into the small pool of illumination formed by the streetlight. Not only so I could see better, but to give the kid an opportunity to run for it.

Smart guy—he took it, stumbling off into the night as the vamp stepped into the light. Tall and muscular with long blond hair, the vamp wore skin-tight black leather. As a fashion statement, it was a bit too obvious in the Texas heat. He must think he was a real bad-ass.

He looked me up and down and his lip curled in a sneer.

Try Me

At five feet, seven inches tall, I look pretty innocuous, with an average build and average brown hair that goes with my average olive complexion. Wearing jeans, heavy boots, and a down-filled vest over a long-sleeved T-shirt, I could be any girl stupid enough to wander the dangerous part of the city in the wee hours, alone.

I could be, but I wasn't.

The vamp's gaze was feral—hungry, yet wary. I'd obviously caught him off guard, and he hesitated. He raised one eyebrow in contemptuous query when I didn't cringe. "You think you can handle me?"

I shrugged. "I don't see why not."

He seemed taken aback. "Who are you?"

My name wouldn't mean anything to him, but what the heck. "Val Shapiro."
"Val?" he jeered. "As in Valentine?"

Yeah. So what? But all I said was, "Bite me."

"Love to." He snarled, his fangs gleaming briefly in the lamplight, then charged at me with inhuman speed.

Predictable. I side-stepped just as quickly. He flew past, missing me by inches. I cuffed him in the back of the head as he went by, and I grinned.

First round to me.

He stumbled to a halt, and his hand went to the back of his head as if he couldn't believe I'd touched him. He whirled around to glare at me, totally outraged.

Enjoying this more than I should, courtesy of my inner demon, I placed one hand on my hip and used the other to wag a finger at him. "You've been a very bad boy." Munching on kids was so not cool.

"Bad? You haven't seen bad yet," he growled.

I felt a tickling in my head—he was trying to control my mind. Good. Just what I'd hoped for. Now that he'd opened a line between us, I could read *his* mind. His name was Jason Talbert, and he was a truly evil vampire. But he was nowhere near strong enough to control me.

Obviously believing he had me in his thrall, the vamp rushed me again.

The part of myself I kept suppressed broke free with a burst of elation, and lust for the game fizzed through my blood. Time to play.

I braced myself and met his rush with a sharp left jab, snapping his head back. The surprise factor slowed him, but only for a moment. Baring his fangs, he tried to use his huge fists to batter me into submission, but I blocked his flurry of blows before any of them could land. It was easy when the mental connection allowed me to read his intentions so clearly.

Try Me

He broke off to stare at me in surprise, circling me warily. I've been told my eyes flash a harsh purple, like the color of a black light, when the succubus within me—I call her Lola—comes out to play. From the look on his face, my eyes had done just that. "What are you?" he demanded. "A slayer?"

I rolled my eyes. "The name's Val, not Buffy. Do I *look* like a blond cheerleader with questionable taste in men?"

"Then *what* are you?"

My mouth quirked into a smile. "Just a girl looking to do some community service by cleaning up the city."

He didn't respond, and didn't telegraph his intention mentally, so he caught me off-guard as he slammed into me. I lost my balance and we both went down in a tangle of arms and legs. Annoyed with myself for letting him surprise me, I head-butted him right in the fangs and scrambled upright.

Good—I needed a real fight.

He jumped me again, but this time I was ready for him. We fought furiously, Jason determined to sink his teeth into my neck and rip my throat out, and me just as determined to stop him. Unfortunately, he liked close-in fighting, and I couldn't get enough space to reach the silver stake I had tucked into my back waistband.

I grabbed his throat and squeezed, but he wrapped me in a vise hold and wouldn't let go. He slammed me up against a brick wall, intent on crushing me. *Trapped*. Worse, the power I tried so hard to keep confined was able to reach him through my energy field in these close quarters and I could feel the lust rise within him as he ground his hips against mine. Pervert.

Though I was able to hold off his slavering overbite and incredibly bad breath with one hand, my other hand was caught between our bodies. He couldn't get to my neck, but I couldn't get to my stake either.

Stalemate.

Time to play dirty. Remembering even vampires had a sensitive side, I kned him in the crotch.

He screeched and let go of me to bend over and clutch the offended part of his anatomy. That took care of the lust. I hit him with an uppercut so hard that he flew backward, landing flat on his back on the sidewalk. Whipping the stake from its hiding place, I dropped down beside him and stabbed him through the heart in one well-practiced motion.

His body arched for a moment, then he sagged and lay motionless—really and truly dead.

Now that my prey had been vanquished and Lola's lust sated, I could feel some of the aches and pains he'd inflicted on my body. It was worth it, though. And I healed quickly, so I wasn't likely to feel them for long.

But adrenaline pumped once more when I heard a car door open down the street. The light was dimmer here between streetlights, but I was still visible—and so was the body I crouched over. "Who's there?" I demanded.

"It . . . it's me."

I recognized that voice. Annoyed, I rose to glare at my younger half-sister. "Jennifer, what are you doing here?"

She got out of the back seat of the beat-up Camry, white-faced. "I told you I wanted to come along."

"And I told you not to."

She shrugged, displaying defiance and indifference as only a sixteen-year-old could. "That's why I hid in the back of the car."

Stupid. I should have checked. I usually drove my motorcycle—a totally sweet Honda Valkyrie—but on nights when I went hunting, my stepfather let me borrow the old beat-up car since it had a convenient trunk. Unfortunately, it was too easy for my little sister to creep into the back seat and stow away there. Obviously.

Trust Jen to try something like this. I'd made the mistake of telling her about my little excursions, even giving her some training on how to defend herself in case she ever encountered one of the undead. She'd been eager to learn everything she could, but Mom had gone off the deep end when she found out, especially when Jen had come home sporting a few bruises.

Mom had forbidden Jen to talk about it again and had threatened me with bodily harm if I even mentioned vampires around my little sis. Lord knew what Mom would do if she found out about this.

Jen stared down at the dead vamp and grimaced. "I've just never actually seen one of them before."

"A dead vampire?"

"Any dead man."

Was that censure in her voice? "Dead *vampire*. That's what he was," I said defensively. Mom was right—Jen was far too young and innocent for my world. I had to find a way to keep her away from all this. "I don't stake innocents."

"I know. I saw."

"Jen, you idiot, you shouldn't have come. It's dangerous." And if one hair on her pretty little head was harmed, Mom would have *my* head on a platter.

"Yeah, well, we can't all be big, strong vampire slayers," she said. She tried to make it sound sarcastic, but it came out sounding more wistful than anything.

I sighed, recognizing jealousy when I saw it. I knew Jen envied my abilities—my *specialness*—with all the longing of a girl who wanted to be something extraordinary herself, never once thinking of the cost. Of course, it was Lola, the demon inside me, that gave me advantages she didn't have. All of my senses were enhanced far beyond normal, including strength, speed, agility, rapid healing, and the ability to read vamps' minds when they tried to control me. Unfortunately, my little sister had no clue as to the price I paid for those advantages.

And she also had no idea how much I envied *her*. Fully human, with All-American blond good looks and plenty of friends, she had everything I had always wanted and could never have—true normalcy, not just the appearance of it. With my Jewish-Catholic, demon-human background and the melting pot that went into my heritage, I felt like a mon-

grel next to a show dog. My lucky half-sister had managed to avoid the bulk of my confusing heritage since we shared only a mother.

But I couldn't say any of that—she wouldn't believe it. "Help me get the body in the trunk," I said tersely.

I usually had to do this part by myself, but why not take advantage of Jen's presence? Besides, participating in the whole dirty business might turn her off for good. I unlocked the trunk and opened it.

She hesitated. "I thought—"

When she broke off, I said, "You thought what? That he'd turn into a neat little pile of dust?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"I wish it were that easy." I took pity on her. "And he'll be dust soon enough—when sunlight hits him. Come dawn, I'll make sure his ass is ash."

Jen grimaced, but I wasn't going to let her off that easily. It had been her decision to tag along—she'd have to pay the price. I grabbed the vampire's feet. "Get his head."

She stared down at Jason's fangs and the small amount of blood around the stake in his heart and turned a little green. "Can't you just leave him in the alley?"

I could, but then Jen wouldn't learn her lesson.

Well, crap, I sounded like Mom now. Annoyed at myself, I snapped, "We can't just leave him here for someone to trip over. What's the matter? Too much for you?"

She shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. "No, I just thought Dad might not like it if you got blood in his trunk."

"He's used to it." Besides, the blood would disintegrate along with the rest of the body when sunlight hit it.

Jen gulped, but I have to give her credit—she didn't wimp out on me. I'd expected her to blow chunks at the least, but she picked up his shoulders and we wrestled the body into the trunk.

Jen wiped her hands on her jeans and stared uneasily at him. "Is he really dead?"

"Mostly," I said, then grinned to myself when Jen took a step back. There was still the remote possibility Jason could heal if the stake was removed from his heart. But for that to happen, his friends would have to rescue him before dawn, tend him carefully for months and feed him lots of blood. Not likely.

I shrugged. "But the morning sun will take care of that." I closed the trunk.

Just as I locked it, the headlights from a car blinded me and a red light from its dashboard strobed the street.

"It's a cop," Jen said in panic.

Not good. But it didn't have to be bad, either. "Relax. Let me handle this."

The plainclothes policeman exited the unmarked car. "Evening, ladies," he said, obviously trying to sound friendly, though he came across as wary and suspicious.

"Evening," I responded.

He might only be in his mid-twenties, but he had the watchful alertness of a seasoned pro. He hooked the thumb of his right hand in his belt, making it easy to draw a weapon from that bulge under his left arm.

As he came closer, I could make out his features. He was about six feet tall with short brown hair, a straight commanding nose, and a solid bod. Totally hot. I might even be interested if he were a little younger and lost the suspicious attitude.

Lola agreed, wondering what it would be like to enthrall him, get him all hot and bothered, feed on all that lovely energy. That was the problem with being part lust demon—ever since I started noticing boys, Lola had been lying in wait, urging me to get up close and personal, wanting to compel their adoration, suck up all their energy.

I'd given in once, and the poor kid had almost died. But not this time. Not again. I beat back the urges, which was pretty easy since I'd just satisfied the lust by taking out the vamp.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Officer . . . ?"

"Sullivan. Detective Sullivan." He flashed his badge at me.

I smiled, trying to look sheepish. "My little sister snuck out of the house to meet her boyfriend, and I was just trying to get her back home before Mom finds out."

"In this part of town?"

"Yeah, well, she doesn't have the best of judgment. That's why she had to sneak out."

Jen gave me a dirty look, but was just smart enough to keep her mouth shut.

He didn't look convinced. "Got any ID?"

"Sure—in the car." I gestured toward the front of the vehicle to ask permission and he nodded. Shifting position so he could watch both of us, he asked Jen for her ID, too.

I retrieved my backpack and handed my driver's license to the detective along with Rick's registration. He glanced at them. "Your last names are different."

"Yeah—we're half-sisters. Same mother, different father. We have the same address, see?"

He nodded and took both IDs back to the car to speak to someone on the radio.

"Ohmigod," Jen said in a hoarse whisper. "What if he finds out there's a body in the trunk? We'll go to jail. Mom and Dad will be so pissed."

"Just relax. Everything should come up clean, so there's no reason for him to even look."

Sullivan finished talking on the radio then handed our IDs back.

"Can we go now?" I asked with a smile. "I'd like to get Jen home before Mom finds out she's gone."

"Sure," he said with an answering smile. "Just as soon as you tell me what's in the trunk."

Oh, crap. Busted.

"Nothing," Jen said hastily, the word ending in a squeak as she backed against the trunk and spread her arms as if to protect it. "Just, you know, junk and stuff. Nothing bad."

Oh, great. Like that didn't sound guilty.

Still casual, he asked, "Would you mind opening it for me?"

Yes, I did. Very much. Swiftly, I mentally ran through the options. I couldn't take him out—I didn't hurt innocents. Besides, he'd just called in our names so they'd know we were the last to see him. Taking off wasn't an option, either—he knew who we were and where we lived.

You could take control of him, force him to let you go, a small voice whispered inside me.

Heaven help me, for a moment, I was tempted. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't take advantage of humans like that. I'd promised the parents—and myself—that I'd never do it again.

My only choice was to do as he asked and hope he'd give me time to explain. Crap. This was so not going the way I planned.

Gently, I moved Jen aside, unlocked the trunk, and braced for the worst.

He lifted the lid and stared down inside. He didn't even flinch. Good grief, was the man made of stone? Expressionless, he asked, "Vampire?"

This was so surreal. I relaxed a little, hoping I might even be able to come out of this without getting into major trouble. "Uh, yeah. The bloody fangs are a dead giveaway."

He gave me a look. The kind that said I wasn't out of trouble yet and he didn't appreciate smart-ass comments. "Why did you stake him?"

Why? He was staring down at the dead undead and he wanted to know *why?*

Jen blurted out, "Because he was drinking some guy's blood." She shifted nervously. "I saw it all."

The cop nodded. "So did I."

I gaped at him. "You did?"

"Yeah, I was just calling for backup when you waltzed up and tapped him on the shoulder."

Crap—I'd been so self-involved I hadn't even noticed the unmarked car. Note to self: *pay attention!*

"And you didn't offer to help?"

He shrugged. "Thought about it. Looked like you didn't need it."

True, but his earlier words suddenly registered. "Backup?" I repeated. "Since when do you cops even know vampires exist?"

He gave Jen a wary glance. "Why don't you go sit in the car?"

She looked ticked off, but went to do as he said, and we moved slightly away from the car as he lowered his voice. "The Special Crimes Unit has known for a long time."

"*Special crimes?*"

"Yeah, you know . . . supernatural, paranormal, weird. But the policy of the San Antonio Police Department is that these things don't exist. At least not officially. No sense in panicking the population. That's why we have the SCU."

"You're a member of this Special Crimes Unit?"

He nodded. "But I'm not dumb enough to take one of these guys on by myself." He gave me a penetrating stare. "Yet you didn't seem to have any problem at all. What's up with that?"

I shrugged, not willing to tell him that I was part demon, just in case he might consider me *special* enough to merit the SCU's attention. I had enough troubles as it was. "I keep in shape, eat my Wheaties."

His eyes narrowed. "Cut the crap. How do you do it?"

"Natural ability and lots of training." When he looked skeptical, I sighed. "Does it matter? There's one less bloodsucker out there. One less monster for you to worry about."

"So it wasn't just a fluke, a lucky kill?"

"I get lucky a lot."

"Look, I don't care how you do it, but maybe you could share—"

An ambulance wailed up just then, lights flashing. It stopped in front of the cop's car. I moved to shut the trunk lid, but Sullivan stopped me. "It's okay," he said. "It's the SCU pick-up unit. They'll take care of him."

The pick-up crew gave Jen and me curious looks, but must have been trained to keep their mouths shut, because they didn't say a word—just efficiently took charge of the body and drove off.

Curious, I asked, "Where are they taking him?"

"To a special morgue designed for the purpose."

"Really? I just let the sun take them."

He quirked a smile. "This one has a skylight, but the SCU likes to document these things first. Plus, it's a bit messy just to leave them lying around on the street." His eyes strayed to my car. "Or in trunks."

"Yeah, well, I didn't want to leave him in an alley, and I don't have some fancy ambulance at my disposal."

"Do this often, do you?"

"No, not really." Only when the succubus part of me threatened to get out of control. When Lola lusted for an outlet, she could be appeased by channeling that energy into a vampire kill. For awhile, anyway.

He stared at me for a moment. "If you ever want to share a few of your secrets, just call me." He handed me a business card.

Not happening. I didn't need anyone else knowing about the demon inside me. But to get rid of him, I stuck the card in my vest pocket and said, "I'll do that."

"All right, you're free to go."

I drove home, annoyed at how late it was. I had to get Jen in her bed before our parents learned she was gone. But just as we got out of the car, Mom and Rick came out of the house.

Crap—just what I needed. I groaned and Jen turned as white as the vamp.

We were in for it now. In resignation, I turned toward them, but Jen backed up, trying to hide in the shadows of the garage.

It didn't work.

"Stop right there, young lady," Mom ordered. Looking part worried, part pissed, she hurried up the sidewalk. Jen looked like a hybrid of her mother and father—all three Andersons were big-boned, blond, and beautiful. It always surprised people when they could see nothing of my pretty mother in my face. Evidently, my father's strong demon genes had overwhelmed all my mother's blond ones.

"Where have you been?" Mom asked Jen. "When we found you missing from your bed, we were so worried."

"I was helping Val," Jen said in a tone that was half sulky, half proud. "We staked a vampire."

We? Yeah, right.

Fury flashed over Mom's face as she turned on me. "How dare you take her with you!"

Whoa . . . intense much? "I didn't," I said, hating how defensive I sounded. "She hid in the car."

"She wouldn't let me come," Jen muttered peevishly.

"Sharon—" my stepfather began.

But Mom wasn't about to be appeased or soothed. She turned on Jen. "Go to your room, young lady. We'll deal with you later. We need to talk to Val. Alone."

Jen looked stubborn, but her father nodded sternly toward the front door and said, "Go on, now."

Jen went, but expressed her indignation and reluctance in every movement of her body. I knew how she felt, but right now, I wished I could go to my room and skip this whole scene.

Before Mom could repeat her demand, I said calmly, "She pestered me to come along but I said no. I didn't know she'd snuck into the back of the car. You know how she is." She'd always been a willful brat.

"You should have known," Mom said, her eyes still flashing anger. "You put her in danger."

Okay, she had a point. I should have checked. Maybe. But the rest was all wrong. Since when was I responsible for Jen's idiocy? I glanced at my stepfather, Rick, for assistance, but met only an impassive expression. Apparently, he had decided to stay out of the fray. As usual. Though he'd raised me as if I were his own, he let Mom have her way when it came to me. Sometimes he stuck up for me, but it didn't look like today was going to be one of those days.

"I didn't put her in danger," I said in annoyance. "She managed to do that all by herself. Besides, she stayed in the car the whole time."

"That's not good enough," Mom insisted. "I told you before that I don't want her involved in anything like this."

A little ticked now, I asked, "Why? You think I'm a bad influence?"

"No, but—"

"Well, if I am, you helped make me this way."

Mom sighed and visibly calmed herself. I would have appreciated the effort if I didn't suspect she wanted to pacify me and ensure the big bad demon didn't get loose.

"It's three o'clock in the morning," I said. "Do we really need to do this now?" Night time on the dark streets of San Antonio was my territory. My family belonged in the bright light of day. Mixing the two made me uncomfortable.

"Yes, now," Mom insisted. She paused, as if searching for just the right words. "For you, hunting vampires is necessary. To take care of . . . that part of you."

"The demon?" Mom would never say it, as if thinking if she didn't voice the word, it would disappear somehow. Unfortunately, it was an irrevocable part of me.

"Yes," Rick said. "The succubus."

My stepfather wasn't afraid to say it. And luckily, he understood and respected Lola. He was careful not to let our energy fields overlap, thank heavens. That would be just . . . wrong.

But he was the one who had helped me realize that if I didn't want to end up insane and suicidal like my father, I had to give in to the demon within occasionally, not fight it. Luckily, the lust of the hunt usually satisfied it enough to keep the other kind of lust from breaking out and breaking men's wills.

Unfortunately, though only one-eighth of my ancestry was demon, it took all the other seven-eighths of me to control it. Was that what they were still worried about? Trying to be patient, I said, "You taught me how to keep it in line. Now that I let it out periodically, I can control it. I would never hurt Jen."

"Not physically," Mom said. "Not deliberately." And her face was set in stubborn lines that I knew all too well. Mom had more to say and wasn't going to stop until she had spewed it all.

"What are you saying?" I asked in exasperation. "That my little sister should be afraid of me?"

"Your half-sister," Mom said. "She doesn't have the same . . . curse you do."

As if I needed a reminder. "I know. No one does." Apparently, I was unique. Lucky me.

Mom's eyes shifted away from my accusing gaze. "Unfortunately, she looks up to you, wants to be just like you."

"Yeah, well, she's obviously not very bright."

Mom shook her head. "I knew it was a mistake to let your sister grow up knowing how different you are."

Yeah, right. Like she wouldn't have noticed. "C'mon, Mom. Jen's not *that* stupid—she knows she can't be like me." Though Jen's obsession lately had run to finding out as much about vampires as she could, under the theory that she was helping me by feeding me all the information she picked up.

"Yes, but she's young and rash. At that age, they all think they're invincible."

Not to mention she thought she could help save the world by helping me. It wasn't flattering, it was annoying, especially since I did nothing to encourage it, knowing how much it bothered Mom. "Okay, so I won't let her follow me."

"No, that won't work. You said it yourself—she'll find a way to do it anyway, then she'll get hurt."

Why was Mom being so unreasonable? "I'll protect her." Then ream her butt for following me.

"You can't protect her and do . . . your thing at the same time. We have to make sure she doesn't go with you."

"Fine. I don't want her along anyway, but how am I going to stop her from following me? That's *your* job, isn't it?"

I'd meant that to sting, but was surprised when Mom took a deep breath and said, "Yes, it is. That's why we've come to a decision."

Uh-oh. Why did I suddenly have the feeling I wasn't going to like this? "What decision?"

"For Jen's sake, it's better if you move out."

"How will that help? She'll still see me at the bookstore."

Mom's face set in stubborn lines. "We'd like you to find another job, too."

My face suddenly turned ice-cold, like someone had just doused me in cold water. Then heat flooded in and nausea followed close behind. I glanced at Rick. He was usually my champion, but in this, his expression showed he sided with his wife. "You're firing me?" I asked in disbelief. How could they do that? I had never even conceived the possibility I wouldn't be working in the family's new age bookstore.

No, that wasn't exactly true. Subconsciously, I'd been expecting this all my life, knowing I wasn't like the rest of them, knowing I couldn't pass, knowing they would one day reject me for it. Apparently, that day was today. My eighteenth birthday. *Happy freakin' birthday, Val.*

"Oh, I get it," I said bitterly, my voice sounding thick with the huge lump in my throat. "You're kicking me out of the family."

"Not out of the family," Mom said. "Just out of the business. Only for a while. If Jen doesn't see you around for a while, maybe she'll give up on this unhealthy obsession, or grow out of it."

I shook my head mutely, afraid to let my many emotions emerge, afraid to let the demon out.

"This is important," Mom insisted. "It's the only way to protect her."

"By throwing me out?" I wailed. How could they do this to me?

"We're not throwing you anywhere," Rick said. "We love you."

Yeah, right. They loved me, but only parts of me—the human parts. The small piece of me that was demon they didn't even like. Or understand. Unfortunately, I couldn't rip that bit out . . . or stop it from holding sway over my emotions. I'd tried. Oh, I'd tried.

And I was tired of being made to feel less than human for something I couldn't help. Shaking my head and trying to keep my pain and fear tightly under wraps, I knew there was nothing I could say. I turned away from their judgmental faces and walked off.

"Val, wait," Mom called. "We'll help you—"

Hell no. Ignoring her, I half-walked, half-ran to the motorcycle I had left waiting at the curb. Mom said something else, but I didn't catch it. I was too busy putting on my helmet, starting the Honda Valkyrie's engine, and peeling out of there like the fiends of hell were at my heels.

Try Me

CHAPTER TWO

Demon rage sizzled in my blood, making me want to blow everything out of my mind in a fast, wild ride. But the human part of me felt heartsick, disappointed . . . bereft. For once, my human emotions overcame the demonic ones, and I slowed down. Just what I needed now was to be stopped by that suspicious cop . . . or any other cop, for that matter. Not knowing where to go, I headed to my favorite place—the River Walk downtown.

At this time of the early morning, before sunrise, the River Walk was free of the tourists that usually crowded its banks. Twenty feet below street level, the quaint charm of the tree-shaded sidewalk cafes, arched stone bridges, and slow-flowing river made it peaceful, serene.

It was the heart of San Antonio, and I loved the whole city. Spanish colonial architecture combined with pockets of nineteenth century German architecture to give the feeling of a city rich in history—a great backdrop for the city's many colorful celebrations. But right now, at this time of night, it was all gray . . . matching my mood.

I parked my Valkyrie far from the tourist area, walked down to the concrete bank of the river, and sat to watch the water flow by.

No doubt about it, I was totally screwed. No place to live, no job, very little money. My lips twisted in a bitter smile. I had some saved up to go to college. Looked like that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

I scrubbed my damp eyes as a stew of emotions churned inside me. I didn't know which I hated more right now—the demon part of me that had caused this problem, or the human part that made me feel so damned weak at this moment.

It didn't matter—the fact was, I'd just lost my family. It felt like something vital had just been ripped from my chest. God, what would I do without them? They were my lifeline to a normal life, the only ones who kept me sane in my demon-ridden world. Could I survive without that touchstone?

This wouldn't be a problem if I had friends. But when I was younger, Mom and Rick had been afraid people would notice my freak side. They had no idea then when the lust demon would first manifest. To avoid the inevitable questions, they kept me out of the public school system, home-schooling me and keeping me carefully away from other kids. Then later, it hadn't seemed worth it to make friends. Not close ones, anyway. Explaining the demon side of myself wasn't an option. So now, I was utterly alone.

I fought back a sob. Well, screw them. They didn't have the only bookstore in the city. I could find another job, a place to live, even friends, damn it. I didn't need them.

Movement caught my eye and I glanced aside to see a small dog approaching warily. A terrier mix of some kind, he had short wiry, wavy hair, long skinny legs, a tail that curled up in a "C" over his back, and light-colored fur—the exact color indeterminate in the faint light of the moon.

I froze. This was not normal. Dogs, cats, and other animals normally shied away from the demon they sensed in me. Though I'd always wanted a dog of my own, it was kind of useless to keep a pet who was terrified of me.

He must be desperate if he was brave enough to approach me. Was he hungry?

I wiped away the moisture from my eyes and laid my hand, palm up, on the ground. Speaking softly, I said, "It's okay. I won't hurt you." I could use a little affection about now.

The dog, his head lowered, looked at me as if he wasn't sure but crept closer anyway. I wished I had some food to entice him into my lap. "It's all right," I said soothingly.

A sudden tickling in my mind made me jump. Was there a vampire somewhere near? But when the tickling disappeared, I dismissed it. Must be my imagination—a vamp wouldn't give up that easily.

Realizing the dog had cowered away, I tried once more to coax him to me. The terrier crept closer to sniff my hand and the tickling resumed. It wasn't my imagination. Someone was trying to enthrall me, make me feel safe and secure. Who? The feel in my mind was masculine. Whoever he was, he was very confident. He obviously thought I was a tourist, an easy meal. For the moment, I stayed still, letting the undead creep think his mind control was working.

As the dog licked my hand, my heart melted. Trying not to startle him, I stroked the terrier's head while I wondered how I could deal quickly with the vamp without scaring off the dog. Unfortunately, I'd stupidly left my stakes on the Valkyrie

Why hadn't he rushed me already? Maybe he was being cautious, ensuring no one else was around. I glanced into the darkness of the trees beyond the walk next to the stone wall, looking for potential weapons. With any luck, there would be some fallen branches there. Maybe I could do it fast enough—

The terrier suddenly jerked his head up and sniffed the air. His eyes flashed purple, then he snarled, baring his surprisingly large, sharp teeth, and leapt to meet the form rushing from the darkness.

Shock cascaded through me, leaving me motionless for a moment. The dog unerringly leapt for the vampire's crotch and clamped down on the sensitive tissues there. The vampire screeched, desperately trying to pull the dog off.

Stifling hysterical laughter, I scrambled to the nearest tree and ripped off a small branch, then charged the vamp and stabbed the sharp end through his heart. He gurgled in disbelief, then fell to the ground, lifeless.

Well, that was interesting.

I studied him. Wearing jeans and a Grateful Dead T-shirt, he was unremarkable, except for the acne covering his face. I'd only seen a few dozen vampires up close and personal and hadn't realized they were susceptible to that condition. I wondered idly how many hundreds of years he'd had to put up with it, and why being a vamp hadn't cured him. I shook my head. It didn't matter.

I glanced down at the terrier, who looked utterly harmless and no worse for wear, though terribly proud of himself. "You're no ordinary dog, are you?" A slight understatement.

The terrier's jaw dropped open, for all the world as if he were laughing at me.

NOT EXACTLY.

What? Who said that? I could swear I heard it in my mind. But I thought I could only hear vamps' thoughts . . . and only when they were trying to control me. Was there another one here? I glanced around.

I'M NOT A VAMPIRE. THINK SMALLER. DOWN HERE.

I stared down at the scruffy mutt in surprise, mentally reviewing the facts. A dog whose eyes flashed purple like mine, who wasn't afraid of my demon side, who attacked vampires, and understood English. Nope, that wasn't normal. "You can talk?"

SURPRISE.

Oh, great, a smart-ass dog. But he obviously craved affection, too. He was lonely . . . just like me.

What was I thinking? I was being taken in by a scruffy mutt who used cute as a weapon. "What *are* you?" I sat down next to him. After all, the vamp wasn't going anywhere.

The dog just looked more forlorn. A HELLHOUND, he said defensively, kind of like he was daring me to laugh.

I snorted. Yeah, right. The terrier no more looked like the drawings of those huge beasts than I looked like the voluptuous women used to portray the succubi. But he wasn't exactly a normal dog, either. Realization dawned, and I asked, "Are you part hellhound? Part-demon, like me?"

The dog wagged his tail. YOU GOT IT, KIDDO.

I sighed in relief. That explained a lot. "Do you belong to anyone?"

He dropped the brash act and moved closer, cautiously, nudging my hand with his cold nose and broadcasting his emotions—he had a strong desire to please me, take away my loneliness, and ease some of his own. I scratched his ears and he radiated pure bliss as he soaked up my attention like a dried-out sponge.

COULD I BELONG TO YOU?

Who could resist? And why not? I could use a pal right now, and this little mutt didn't seem to be any threat. To me, anyway. And we were definitely kindred spirits. I hugged him, letting the action take away a little of the hurt. He licked my face, cementing my decision. "Okay, what's your name?"

He glanced at me with a gleam in his eyes, the scruffy little whiskers on his chin making him look vulnerable and adorable. FANG.

I stifled a laugh. That was a heck of a big name for a little dog to live up to. "My name's Val."

He sighed. NICE TO MEET YOU, VAL.

"Want to hang with me?"

Wriggling with excitement, the terrier jumped up and licked my face. YES!

I wiped off the doggie drool and eyed him warily. He might appear to have human responses, but he was obviously still fully canine. "You hump my leg and you're dead meat."

His jaw dropped open again as he laughed at me. NO HUMPING, I PROMISE.

Who knew hellhounds had a sense of humor?

I laughed, feeling a little hope steal into my heart. What a weird day. I'd never forget my eighteenth birthday, that's for sure. I might have lost a home and job, but I'd acquired a dog . . . and maybe a friend. "Okay, Fang, let's go find someplace to live."

Good timing—a rosy glow heralded the dawn and I waited as the first rays reached out and touched the vampire's body. It burst into searing green-tinged flame that incinerated it in moments.

Good. Now for the next problem—how to get Fang onto the motorcycle. I glanced down at him. "Whatcha think? If I zip you up in my vest, you think you'll ride okay?"

PIECE OF CAKE.

I straddled the bike and he leapt up in front of me. I zipped my heavy vest over him so only his head poked out, just below my chin. He enjoyed the ride, sniffing all the wind-borne scents. I kind of liked it, too. It was amazing how a little warm body snuggled up to me could make me feel so much better.

But I needed to find a better long-term solution to take him with me. I had a feeling this little dog was going to be a real asset in sniffing out vampires.

It was getting pretty light when I arrived back home. Or what used to be home. I figured they wouldn't begrudge me a nap. I didn't need much sleep, but then again, I hadn't gotten any last night. I definitely needed some shut-eye. Then I'd pack my things and look for a job, a new place . . . a new life.

I unzipped Fang from my vest. In the light of day, I could see his fur was a reddish-blond color. It made him look even more harmless, made it even harder to believe he was part-demon.

I snuck Fang and myself in my bedroom window just in case someone was up—I wasn't up to having a conversation right now.

Curious about the hellhound, I pulled out my special reference books—the three-volume *Encyclopedia Magicka*. These ancient books were the only thing I'd inherited from my father. But I didn't keep them for sentimental reasons—they were the most accurate references on vampires and succubi I'd seen. Stood to reason they'd be accurate on other creatures as well.

"Hmm, hellhounds . . . "

Fang's ears perked up and he came to sit beside me, his head cocked in inquiry.

"Says here that hellhounds are large, fierce dogs, blood-red in color." I glanced at the small dog, whose strawberry-blond fur and slight body bore no resemblance to the drawing, which looked like a greyhound on steroids. "See?"

I showed him the picture and he studied it for a moment.

WHOA.

"Yeah—looks a little different from you. What percentage of you is actually hellhound, anyway?" The rest included a big dose of terrier.

He somehow managed to look exasperated. I DON'T DO MATH—OR FAMILY TREES. I'M A DOG, FERGAWD-SAKE.

Yeah, right. A dog with an attitude. Not to mention a soft, mushy side he apparently liked to keep hidden. Just like me.

He nudged me impatiently with his nose. GO ON.

"Okay, okay. Hellhounds have very sensitive noses and were bred to sniff out other demons and creatures of the night at the command of their master, then rip out their throats." I glanced at him. "You do understand the difference between a throat and a crotch, don't you?"

HA HA. VERY FUNNY.

"Okay, so you're a little on the short side. I get it. But . . . why didn't you try to rip out my throat?" I was part-demon, after all.

WHAT DOES THE BOOK SAY?

I read on. "Oh, I see. A hellhound who is bound to its master's will has to obey that master, but once the master dies, the hound is free to choose its own prey." Since he didn't have a master, the throat-ripping was optional.

The book went on to advise that a hellhound who lost its master be destroyed lest it wreak indiscriminate havoc, and it provided some gruesome tales to support that recommendation.

I didn't read that part aloud. No need—my new friend was obviously very discriminate and on the side of the good guys. Must be the normal canine part of him.

YOU GOT IT, BABE.

Oh, yeah, and he could read my mind. I closed the book. "Well, now, looks like a hellhound just might be a demon girl's best friend."

His jaw dropped in a doggie grin. YEP, THAT'S WHAT I'M THINKING.

I scratched his ears. He made me feel a little better about the whole crappy evening. But for now, I was beat. I didn't feel like changing, so I crashed in the clothes I was wearing, and Fang curled up next to me. Feeling a little comforted, I drifted off to sleep.

Surprisingly, I didn't dream. Or if I did, I didn't remember it. I woke about noon and the feel of Fang's furry little body against mine was kind of nice. I wanted to stay in this nice warm place forever, but reality hit and I realized I couldn't. I had to start a new life.

Fang poked me with his nose. I NEED TO GO OUTSIDE. AND I'M HUNGRY.

Oh, yeah—dogs required care. At least he was civilized. Realizing the rest of the family should be working at the store about now, I let him out to do his business then showered and raided the kitchen for both of us. As he chowed down on some leftover stew, I had some cereal and contemplated my next move.

I had so much to do . . . it was kind of overwhelming.

Guess I'd better pack first. I glanced around my room. I'd need clothes, bedding, that kind of stuff. Would they let me take the furniture once I found a place? If not, I'd have to buy some. Not to mention other stuff like dishes and towels.

There was so much to think about. The cereal congealed in my stomach. I'd thought I was grown up, but the sheer number of things I had to do made me feel inadequate and so not ready for this. My small savings probably wouldn't go very far. Not for long, anyway.

And I wouldn't be able to come back. I blinked back tears. It wasn't that much, but it was home . . . a home where I wasn't welcome anymore. I rubbed my chest with the heel of my hand, wondering if the pain there would ever go away. Could you die of a broken heart?

Fang poked me. HEY, YOU HAVE LOTS TO LIVE FOR. YOU HAVE ME.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "That I do. What say we pack this stuff up?"

To keep my mind off the decisions I had to make, I moved swiftly and methodically, stuffing clothes, books, and other things I thought I'd need in my duffel bag. It was tougher than I'd expected. Each thing I touched held memories of better times . . . the beaded bracelet Jen had made me, the pentacle Mom had given me for protection, the amusing vampire doll Rick had stuffed in my Christmas stocking . . .

Damn, I'd forgotten about the holidays. I dropped down onto the bed, hugging the silly doll with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. The upcoming Halloween and the Day of the Dead were always big at the store, but the biggies at home were Thanksgiving and Christmas. Where would I be then? Would I even be invited?

Even if I was, too many harsh things had been said—on both sides—for it to be anything but strained and uncomfortable. It could never be the same again.

Abruptly, I stood and wiped the moisture from my eyes. No time to worry about that now. I had to pack and get out of here.

An hour later, I heard a knock on the door. I felt my stomach clench—it had to be my family. Make that ex-family. I refused to answer it, not wanting to experience another scene, not wanting to cry and let them know how much they'd hurt me. Besides, who knew what they'd accuse me of this time?

When I ignored a second knock, Mom and Rick opened the door and walked in anyway. They must have left Jen minding the store alone.

Fang leapt to his feet on the bed and growled menacingly. They stopped short. "What's that?" Mom asked in surprise.

I gathered the shreds of my composure together and took refuge in sarcasm to avoid letting them see my pain. "It's a dog, Mother."

"I can see that. What's it doing here?"

"His name is Fang and he's my new friend. As to what he's doing, he's reminding you that it's not polite to barge in to someone else's room."

YOU KNOW THESE PEOPLE? Fang asked.

I glanced at my parents, but they didn't seem to have heard him. It must be just me. To Fang, I said, "It's okay. These are my landlords, though not for much longer. We're moving."

Mom looked hurt. Good. I wanted her to feel the pain she'd given me. "We're more than your landlords," she protested.

"Not anymore. You kicked me out, remember?" Suddenly uncertain if I could face another huge scene, I asked, "What do you want? I'm busy." I turned to the duffel and fiddled with the stuff inside, wishing they'd just go away. They obviously weren't going to apologize, weren't going to tell me all was forgiven, and I didn't want to hear any more rationalizations, didn't want to break down and bawl like a baby.

"We thought you might need some help finding a place, moving . . ."

Continuing to stuff things in the duffel, I said, "No, thanks. Got it covered. Though I might come back later to get my bed and dresser, if that's okay."

"Of course." Mom seemed at a loss. "Maybe we could talk."

"You said enough last night." Lashing out felt good, fed a little of the lust for revenge Lola was stirring up inside me.

"No, we want you to understand—"

"I understand perfectly. Let's not rehash this, okay? I heard enough the first time."

"But—"

"No, I get it," I said, interrupting her and facing them fully for the first time, letting the hurt come out in harsh words. "You good guys, me bad guy. I'm leaving."

Fang moved closer, silently offering support.

"It's not as black and white as that," Mom protested.

How could she say that after she'd so clearly chosen her other daughter—her normal daughter—over me? What a hypocrite. "It is from this side of the fence."

Rick watched silently from the doorway, looking disturbed and somewhat regretful. But that's all he did—stand there. Guess he wasn't going to come to my aid . . . again.

"Val, I know you use this smart-ass façade to keep your true self hidden from the world, but you don't have to use it with us," Mom said.

"This is the real me. Like it or lump it." I paused, then said sarcastically, "Oh, wait. You've already done that, haven't you? Only, I'm the one who took the lumps."

Looking exasperated, Mom said, "You're determined to be difficult, aren't you?"

"Me?" I glared at the both of them. "What if I told you that you had to leave your family, that you weren't wanted anymore, that you were less than human? How would *you* feel?"

"That's not what I said."

"The hell it isn't." No matter how much Mom tried to sugarcoat it, that's the way it played out. That's the way it felt, deep inside. And for once, Lola didn't try to break free. All this turmoil inside me must be feeding her lust somehow.

"Don't you talk to me that way. I'm still your mother."

I'd had enough. Whirling on her, I said, "No, you're not. You disowned me. I don't have to listen to you anymore. Get out."

"What?" Mom appeared truly shocked. I'd never talked back to them.

"You heard me," I choked out past the tears in my throat. "Just . . . leave."

Fang added a low growl for good measure. WANT ME TO MAKE HER LEAVE?

I shook my head at him. *No—she is still my mother.* Though it was nice to have someone on my side for a change.

Looking hurt, Mom left in a huff. Good—maybe she'd get a small taste of what she'd put me through last night. But Rick was still in the doorway.

"What do you want?" I asked tiredly. I hoped he wasn't going to bitch at me, too. I couldn't handle it right now.

With compassion in his expression, Rick said, "She still loves you, you know."

She had a funny way of showing it. "She loves her other daughter—your daughter—more."

"You're my daughter, too, sweetheart, you know that. In every way that counts."

I blinked back the moisture in my eyes and shook my head. I very much wished it were so, but though he had always tried to treat us the same, the fact was, he couldn't—Jen and I were too different. Mom didn't even try.

He added quietly, "And your mom doesn't love Jen more. It's just that you remind her so much of your father"

Yeah, and I knew how much Mom hated the way my father's lust demon had seduced her, had forced her to feel desire. Would I be forced to pay the price for what my father had done for the rest of my life? "I'm not like my father," I snapped.

"I know that. Just give it time, Val. This'll blow over eventually."

I shrugged, unwilling to let him know how much it hurt. "Who cares? I'm eighteen now. I don't need any of you anymore." And I couldn't take the heartache.

"Oh, yeah. Happy—"

I glared at him, and he was wise enough not to finish that particular sentence.

Sheepishly, he pulled something from his pocket and held it out to me. "Here, we got you this."

I glanced down. It was a cell phone . . . with a little red bow stuck on it. They hadn't forgotten my birthday. Tears pricked against my eyelids again. I turned away. "No thanks. I don't need anything from you."

"Don't be stupid, Val. You'll need it, to find a job, a place to live, keep in touch"

He was right. With no friends and living at home, I hadn't really needed a cell. But now I would. And it wasn't like it was charity or anything. Reluctantly, I reached out to take it. "Okay." Realizing that sounded a little churlish, I added, "Thanks." After all, I knew he meant well.

"It's pre-paid so you won't have to worry about the bills for awhile. And here." He pulled an envelope out of another pocket. "Here are your wages from the store . . . along with a little bonus."

Now that, I'd earned. I stuffed the envelope and the phone in my duffel. "So, you'll give me a good reference?" I asked around the lump in my throat.

"Of course we will." He paused. "Do you know what you'd like to do? I have some friends—"

"No." That *would* be charity. "I mean, I'll find a job on my own. I found out last night that the cops aren't as clueless as I thought when it comes to the vampires. Maybe they could use some help."

"Is that wise?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"The reason you hunt vampires is to give the succubus an acceptable outlet for the lust—"

"I know that," I snapped. Lust for the hunt wasn't nearly as satisfying for Lola, but it kept her pacified. Even more important, it helped me live with myself the next morning.

Ignoring my interruption, Rick continued, "But if you let the demon free that often, you'll give the succubus a lot more dominance."

"So?"

"So will you be able to handle that?"

Damn him, he actually looked concerned. And it was a good question. Could I handle it and stay human? Or would the demon's constant freedom give it more control? "I'll have to handle it, won't I?"

Rick froze for a moment, looking as if he were struggling with himself, then said softly, "If you need any help with sparring—"

"What? You'll piss off your wife and help me out? Yeah, right. I've got a life-sized picture of that happening."

I wasn't being fair, and I knew it. When I'd almost drained that poor boy of all his energy, Rick had been very patient with my rampant hormones and raging succubus. For awhile there, I'd been like a cat in heat, and the neighborhood boys had sniffed around me like rutting tomcats.

That's when Mom had changed, had started treating me like something less than human. Rick, however, had helped me to channel the demon through martial arts courses. He'd even let me take out my frustrations by trying out my fighting skills on him—once he was sufficiently padded, of course.

I'd gone looking for trouble, too, sneaking out at night to search for scumbags and rapists to take out my frustrations on. But pounding on full humans didn't quite do the trick, so when I ran into a vampire the first time a year ago, I'd been elated. Finally, there was something I could really sink my teeth into . . . so to speak.

And Rick had helped me research the undead, learn how to deal with them. I owed him. "I'm sorry. I know you helped me. A lot." Especially since Mom had been in complete denial and unable to deal with her daughter's awakening sexuality—no help at all.

He raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you ever wonder how I knew what to do?"

"Uh . . . no." I'd just always assumed my stepfather was the smartest man in the world, especially when it came to the woo-woo stuff. After all, he owned a new age bookstore. "How?"

"When you were twelve, a man visited your mother and me. Said he knew what you were and gave us some advice on how to help you handle your powers when they manifested."

Really? "How did he know?"

"He wouldn't say, but it was obvious he knew what he was talking about—he was part lust demon, too."

"Whoa." My head reeled from a total major shift in world view. "There are others like me?" Then again, why wouldn't there be?

"Apparently."

"And you never *told* me?" It might have helped me live with my oddness if I'd known there were other energy-sucking demons in the world.

"You were doing well, so the three of us decided it would just confuse you if you did know. He stopped by from time to time after that to give me more pointers on how to train you to fight the vampires."

Though my head was spinning with hundreds of unanswered questions, only one emerged. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because you're going to be giving the succubus a lot more control. If you have trouble handling it, maybe he can help."

Even talking to someone with the same type of demon might help. With excitement rising within me, I asked, "What's his name? Where can I find him?"

"His name is Lucas Blackburn. But I don't know how to contact him—he always found us. And I haven't seen him at all since you started fighting vampires."

I nodded slowly. "No problem. I'll find him." I didn't know how or where, but I had to know how he knew about me, why he'd helped me.

Now that Rick had dropped that bomb, he left, closing the door gently behind him.

I dropped into a chair, stunned, and Fang nudged me with his nose, looking concerned. ARE YOU OKAY?

"Yeah, I'm okay." I hugged him, grateful for his consolation as my mind tried to make sense of this new information.

Mom had always discouraged questions about my father, and I'd never really wanted to know about the demon who'd spawned me, especially after what happened the day he killed himself. I figured I knew all I needed to. But now, I wasn't so sure. If there were others like me, maybe I wasn't as alone as I thought.

Who was Lucas Blackburn, and what other secrets might he reveal?

Try Me

CHAPTER THREE

Now that I was all packed, I stood next to my bed and stared at my duffel bag. I wasn't quite sure what to do first. Find a job, an apartment, or Lucas Blackburn? They all seemed equally important.

Fang pawed at me. FOOD AND SHELTER FIRST.

I jumped, not quite used to him reading my thoughts yet. But he had a point. It would probably be a good idea to find a place near where I ended up working, so I'd just find a hotel or something for the night, then something more permanent once I got a job. I glanced down at Fang. One that took dogs.

GOOD PLAN.

I grinned. He was gonna be a lot of fun to have around. I pulled out the Yellow Pages and called around. Holy crap—I never realized before how expensive hotels could be. At this rate, I'd go through my savings way too quickly. No five star hotels for us—I could only afford one or two. I found a relatively inexpensive one that took dogs and we headed that way, with my duffel on the back of the Valkyrie and Fang in the front.

After a brief hassle at the front desk over my lack of a credit card, I paid cash and got the key to the room.

The place looked like it hadn't been redecorated since way before I was born—with an orange and green color scheme, tired bedspread, threadbare carpet, and a chipped bathtub.

I dumped my duffel on the dresser and Fang sniffed disdainfully. I had to agree. I didn't have his nose, but I could still smell stale smoke and the acrid stench of urine where previous animal occupants had staked their territory. I wouldn't be going barefoot on this carpet.

DON'T USE THE BEDSPREAD EITHER, Fang advised, curling his lip at it.

En. I didn't want to know why. Unfortunately, I could imagine all too clearly. I scootched the slick bedspread off the bed with my foot and kicked it into the corner. The sheets appeared clean. As I looked doubtfully at them, Fang gave them the sniff test.

ALL CLEAR.

I sat down on the bed and looked around, my heart sinking. Is this what I had to look forward to, being on my own?

My chest grew tight. I just wanted to go home. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible. Now what? I had so much to do . . . and so little experience in doing any of this. What was I going to do? Give me a vampire to kill and I was totally there. But ask me to fit in somehow in the real world as an adult? I wasn't sure I was ready.

Fang jumped up next to me and nudged me. THIS IS TEMPORARY. BESIDES, YOU'RE NOT ON YOUR OWN. YOU HAVE ME.

That I did, along with an even greater incentive to find a job, with two mouths to feed. I pulled out the Yellow Pages and tore out the section that listed bookstores. Fang declined to stay in the room by himself, so I bundled him up in my vest. It was too warm during the day, even in October, for the vest, but it was the only way I was sure Fang would be safe.

We headed out and I drove to the closest bookstore—an independent like Mom and Rick's—and parked. Unzipping my vest, I glanced down at my black shirt, suddenly sprouting dozens of light reddish blond hairs. "You shed."
Note to self: get a lint roller.

SORRY, Fang said, sounding kind of embarrassed. NOTHING I CAN DO ABOUT IT.

"No biggie—I'll just try to remember to wear Fang-colored clothes."

Brushing the dog hair off as much as I could, I said, "Do you mind staying out here? I don't think dogs are allowed inside."

He gave a mental sniff. DISCRIMINATION. But he stretched out next to the Valkyrie and laid his head down with a sigh.

Unfortunately, they didn't have any openings. And three bookstores later, I was beginning to get discouraged. I straddled my motorcycle in front of the Rolling Oaks Mall on the outskirts of the city, trying to figure out what to do next. It was nearing closing time and no one was hiring, though they'd had me fill out applications in case there was an opening later.

Heck, even if I did find a job, bookstore clerks didn't get much better than minimum wage. If apartments cost as much as hotels, I was in big trouble. Not to mention everything that went with them, like utilities and food and stuff. Could I file for unemployment?

FIRST THINGS FIRST. I'M HUNGRY.

So was I. I glanced down at Fang. "What do you eat?"

WHATEVER. MICE, GOPHERS, WHAT I CAN FIND IN THE TRASH. I'M AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EATER.

Ick. TMI . . . though I *had* asked. "You want dog food?"

He shuddered. ICK, he repeated back at me.

What *did* you feed a hellhound? "So, if you had your druthers, what would you eat?"

PIZZA. I'M A PIZZA-LOVING FOOL.

I couldn't help it—I grinned. He was practically salivating at the thought. "Any particular toppings?"

LOTS OF MEAT AND CHEESE, NO ONIONS OR PEPPERS.

The thought of a hellhound putting in such a specific order for pizza amused me. "Okay, you got it." I went back into the mall and got a couple of slices for us at the food court, plus a Coke for me and water for Fang.

We ate dinner under a nearby tree and I wondered what to do next. I really didn't want to go back to that hotel room just yet, and it wasn't dark enough yet for the vampires to come out to play. Maybe I should get a paper, check out the help wanted ads. But what else was I qualified for? It's not like I had a lot of experience . . . or education.

YOU CAN KILL VAMPIRES.

"Thanks, Fang. I know you're trying to be helpful, but I don't think there are any paying jobs out there for that."

TOO BAD. I LIKE KILLING VAMPIRES.

I grinned, then suddenly realized I was wrong—there *was* a job out there for that kind of thing, as I'd mentioned to Rick. That detective last night had one . . . and he'd asked me for tips. Maybe I could get a few bucks for passing on what I knew to the cops, help them with training or something.

Fang raised one eyebrow without lifting his head off his front feet. SO CALL HIM ALREADY.

Why not? His card was still in my vest pocket, so I pulled it out and used my new cell phone to dial his number.

"Sullivan."

Now that I had him on the line, I wasn't quite sure what to say. "Hey, there, detective, it's Val Shapiro."

"Who?"

"You know, Val Shapiro. From last night?"

"Oh, yeah," he said in recognition. "You're the kid."

I grimaced at the "kid"—he wasn't that much older than me. "Uh, yeah. That's me." Geez, could I sound any lamer?

"Whatcha need?"

"Uh, well, I wondered if you might want to hire me. You know, to give you some pointers or something."

He hesitated. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

Oh, crap, I'd forgotten about the male ego. He probably wouldn't want to take advice from a girl—not about something as macho as fighting the undead. I was gonna have to play on his sympathies. "Well, you see, I didn't get my sister back home on time last night, and my parents got pissed and kicked me out of the house."

"Whoa, that's cold."

"Yeah, they fired me from my job, too." Before he could say anything else, I added, "So, you know, I kind of need a job and you seemed interested in what I could do . . ." I trailed off, realizing how pathetic that sounded. "Hey, never mind. I'm sorry I bothered you. I'll just—"

"Hold on just a minute. I might be able to do something for you. How old are you again?"

"Eighteen." My stomach lurched again as I realized it was still my birthday. It sure didn't feel like it.

"Good. Can I call you right back?"

"Sure." I gave him the number and hung up. "So, Fang, you think he'll call back?"

HE'D BE A FOOL NOT TO.

Yeah, but would he call?

CHILL. HE'LL CALL.

I sighed. "I wish I had your optimism."

I didn't move from under the tree, afraid I'd miss hearing the call on the Valkyrie. Fang and I waited for what seemed like forever, but was only about an hour, before the phone rang again.

I wasn't used to it, so it startled me. It wasn't from any phone number I knew, so hopefully it was the cop. I fumbled a bit before I figured out how to answer it. "Hello?"

"Sullivan here. Hey, have you got time to meet some people now? I may have something for you."

Really? Cool! Ignoring Fang's TOLD YOU SO, I said, "Sure. Where?"

He gave me directions to a building near one of the cop shops and I headed over there with Fang, wondering what the detective had in mind. I was feeling pretty optimistic, but I reminded myself he didn't actually say the "something" was in law enforcement. It might be something unrelated, though I hoped he didn't expect me to clean toilets or run a register where I had to ask, "You want fries with that?"

The address he gave me had a sign designating it as the Special Crimes Unit. Things were looking up. At Fang's insistence, I brought him in with me. "Try to look inconspicuous," I suggested.

He just dropped his jaw in a doggie grin and followed me inside. "I'm here to see Dan Sullivan," I told the lady at the desk.

She gave me a disinterested look and paged him. I don't think she even noticed the hellhound at my feet.

The detective did, though. He came through the door, glanced down, and said, "What's with the dog?"

"He's uh, you know, one of those special assistance dogs."

Fang didn't seem happy with my explanation. WELL, THE SPECIAL PART IS RIGHT, ANYWAY.

The detective raised an eyebrow. He wasn't buying it. "And what does he assist you with?"

I glanced warily at the desk lady, not sure how much I should say. "The same thing you caught me doing last night."

"Oh? I didn't see him then."

That's because I hadn't found Fang until later. "Look, it's a bit too cold to leave him outside. Fang is very well-behaved, I swear."

Dan looked down at the dog. "Fang?"

Fang concentrated on looking cute and obedient, though privately he said, MAKE FUN OF ME AND I'LL POOP ON YOUR NICE CLEAN FLOOR.

Don't you dare make a liar out of me, I warned him.

DON'T WORRY—I'LL PLAY THE NICE LITTLE PET.

Sullivan shrugged. "Why not? We're training other dogs to sniff out these targets. Follow me."

I followed him into a large room that looked like a high school gym—must be some kind of training area. Three other guys were there, just talking, and they looked up as we came in.

To keep from having to go through the whole dog-challenging thing again, I told Fang mentally, *Play along with me here, okay?* Out loud, I said, "Sit. Stay."

Fang planted his butt immediately and stayed put as I walked toward the men. YES, MASTER, came the exaggerated response.

Very funny. But just remember who provides the pizza. If you don't want to continue dining on vermin, work with me.

One of the guys—a beefy blond with his hair shaved close to his head—took a look at me and barked out a laugh. "This is your super slayer?"

Sullivan just smiled. "This is Detective Horowitz, and the other *scuzzy* is Fenton." He nodded toward a lean Hispanic man who was a little older, a little grayer, and seemed to carry the weight of the world—or at least San Antonio—on his shoulders. "And this is our fearless leader, Lt. Ramirez."

"*Scuzzy?*" I repeated. Was this one of those weird male bonding things where they called each other rude names and beat each other up?

"Comes from SCU," Sullivan said. "It's what the others call us. There are more of us, but they're not on duty yet. Gentlemen—and I use the term very loosely—this is Val Shapiro."

The two detectives folded their arms and gave me short nods of recognition. Curt ones, like they wanted to make sure I didn't think they were nods of acceptance. Ramirez, on the other hand, smiled and shook my hand. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Shapiro. Would you like to show us what you can do?"

I liked this guy, and it appeared he was the one I needed to impress. I shrugged. "Sure. Got a vampire handy?"

The other two laughed and exchanged amused looks. My face went hot for a moment, then reminded myself not to let them get to me. They had no idea what I could do. But Sullivan did, and he wasn't laughing.

Ramirez smiled, though it wasn't a mean one. "I thought perhaps we'd start with some sparring."

That explained the mats on the floor. "Okay. Who'd you like me to spar with?"

Ramirez made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the three other men. "Take your pick."

They obviously expected me to go for the smallest guy, Fenton, but I had something to prove. Horowitz was easily the biggest—and the most annoying. "I'll take him."

Horowitz stripped off his jacket. "This won't take long."

I didn't say anything—I just peeled off my bulky down vest and laid it next to Fang.

I'LL GUARD IT WITH MY LIFE, the terrier assured me gravely.

Smart-ass. Horowitz rolled his shoulders, looking über confident. Well, he was about to be über surprised.

"Any rules?" I asked.

Ramirez nodded. "This is practice. No maiming. No shots to the genitals . . ." he glanced at Horowitz " . . . or the breasts. You'll go on my mark."

I sized up Horowitz. He had muscles, but not the bulges of a bodybuilder as I'd expected. He didn't rely on brute strength, then. He must practice some form of martial arts. Which one?

They moved to the center of the room and the detective stretched his arm and leg muscles. Good—he was taking this seriously. I did the same.

I tried to stay loose and ready for whatever he threw at me. I wouldn't be able to read his mind like a vamp's, but then again, he would be a lot slower.

He crouched in a fighter's stance and I suddenly realized he must have a hundred pounds on me. What was I thinking?

YOU CAN TAKE HIM, Fang said.

Guess I'd have to.

"Go," Ramirez said.

Horowitz moved faster than I expected, spinning around in an elegant move to land a solid kick to my stomach. Crap, I hadn't expected that. I'd figured him for some oriental martial arts move, not the French *savate*.

But as he danced away, he seemed surprised that I wasn't writhing on the ground. That was one definite advantage of being part demon—I could take a lot more punishment than most people.

"Give up?" he taunted.

"No, just waiting for you to wear yourself out," I gasped. The other men chuckled and I pretended to be more hurt than I was, watching to see what he would do next. Would he stay with the *savate* kicks or try something else?

He stuck with what worked and whirled to try the same move again. This time, however, I was ready for him, and grabbed his ankle and threw him to the floor. Just as quickly, he tried to whip my legs out from under me, but I'd anticipated that and jumped out of the way. He surged to his feet, but before he could get positioned to lash out at me again with his feet, I rushed him, hurling punches that he had to block.

He didn't expect that. I kept it up, chasing him around the mat, throwing my fists as fast as I could while the men hooted and hollered on the sidelines. Horowitz blocked some blows, but not all, and I landed a few solid hits on his face and to his stomach while he was primarily occupied with defending himself. If I could just keep him off balance, he wouldn't be able to get enough distance from me to use those deadly feet of his.

He got a few licks in past my guard, and one really good one, a beautiful right cross. Ouch, that stung. Lola raged to life, and since this time it was a lust for blood, I let her loose, reveling in the power that filled my body.

Fueled by my secret weapon, I slugged him with a powerhouse that had him staggering away, then used his own technique to batter him with a series of lightning *savate* kicks in the shin, stomach, and chin.

He went down.

Instantly, I was on top of him, gripping his throat as I pinned him to the mat. "Yield."

He struggled for a moment, but I had him completely immobilized.

A sudden weight landed on my back and an arm came across my throat, choking me, cutting off my air. Oof.

"Too bad for you he has a friend," Fenton muttered in my ear. "This is what it's really like on the streets."

All of a sudden, he let go with a curse and I spun around to see Fang clamped to his backside.

"Too bad for you I have a friend, too," I said with a grin. "Good dog."

Fenton tried to beat Fang off his butt, though he was having a hard time reaching him. Ramirez commanded, "Stand down."

When both men went still, I took pity on Fenton. "Let go, Fang."

Fang obediently let go and trotted over to my side. *Good work*, I told him privately. *Thanks for the backup*.

NO PROBLEM. HE WASN'T PLAYING FAIR.

No, he wasn't. Ramirez must have thought so, too—he glared at Fenton. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"Helping out my partner." He sounded defensive. But he couldn't meet Ramirez's glare. He looked away, rubbing his rear. "Sorry, I just got carried away."

"Don't do it again." Ramirez turned to Horowitz. "You concede the match?"

He didn't really have to, but he nodded.

Horowitz was good—*very* good. The full humans I'd fought in various martial arts classes had never lasted this long against me. Even better, he hadn't pulled his punches, hadn't treated me like a girl.

At Horowitz's sign of capitulation, the demon lust subsided within me, and I took a shaky breath. It was silly, but I envisioned Lola as kind of a sexy genie—a Marilyn Monroe type—who stayed corked up in her bottle until lust blew the cork out. I mentally stuffed Lola back in and corked the bottle. It wasn't easy, but I could do it. Good. I could handle this. If they'd have me.

Horowitz held out his hand and smiled. "Hell, anyone who can beat the crap out of me like that is all right in my book. Call me Hank."

Shocked, I shook his hand. Fenton offered his, too. "I'm Mike."

Sullivan added, "Call me Dan."

I grinned. It felt good to be accepted. "You can call me Val—and my partner here is Fang."

They all gave Fang a dubious glance.

Fang grinned back up at them. NO MONSTER HERE. NO SIREE. JUST A FAITHFUL CANINE COMPANION DEFENDING HIS BELOVED MASTER.

I resisted the urge to snort, but it must have worked, because Hank asked, "How do you do that, Val?"

I shrugged. "Trade secret."

Ramirez looked at Dan. "So, you checked her out, I take it?"

He nodded.

"Tell us about her."

I thought about protesting, but didn't want to jeopardize my shot at maybe working with these guys.

Dan Sullivan slanted a glance at me. "Her parents divorced when she was only a few months old, and a year later, her mother married Rick Anderson, the owner of the Astral Reflections New Age Bookstore where she works. Her father died when she was five."

Damn—I hadn't known he could be so thorough in such a short time.

He continued. "She was home-schooled until she got her GED—early. She has a younger half-sister, Jennifer, though *she* attends public school. Val has taken every martial arts and self-defense course offered in the city—including *savate*—but never stuck with any of them long enough to compete or earn belts." He slanted a glance at me. "The classes bore you?"

Good guess. "Pretty much." Once I'd learned the forms and how to combat them, I'd moved on. I didn't have to actually practice them to understand them. Lola's influence made me a natural fighter, but I learned a lot from watching the matches of the masters.

He nodded as if he'd expected that answer. "She's a gifted fighter, but I can't figure out where she gets her speed and strength. There's no indication of steroids or other drugs. She keeps her nose clean. It must come naturally."

YEAH—AS NATURAL AS IT WOULD BE FOR ANY PART-DEMON GIRL.

Ignoring Fang, I asked, "That it?" But I had to admit I was a tad impressed. He'd been busy.

"Not all. You have no close girlfriends, no boyfriends, and your only extravagance is a motorcycle, a Honda Valkyrie. Today's your eighteenth birthday, and your parents celebrated by kicking you out of the house."

Well, that last part I'd told him. But the rest—I don't know how he found that out so fast. No wonder he was a detective. "You're good," I admitted.

Ramirez grinned. "How'd you like a job, Val?"

Wow—was it that easy? Getting paid for something I already did for free? "I'm in."

"Good. With your brawn and his brains, you'd make a great team."

Whoa—team? That wouldn't work. Being around the cop all the time . . . what if he found out what I really was? I backtracked quickly. "I already have a partner—Fang."

THAT'S RIGHT. YOU DON'T NEED ANYONE ELSE.

It didn't look like Dan was too crazy about the idea either. But Ramirez didn't agree. "It's unit policy—you have to have backup before you engage one of the targets. And Dan doesn't have a partner right now—he lost his last week . . . to one of *them*."

It was too risky. I'd been hiding my true nature for far too long. Working alongside a hot cop, letting him get close—Lola was bound to make her presence known. What would happen when he found out what I truly was? I'd probably be classed as a monster along with the vamps. Then what would I do?

Try Me

I took a deep breath. *Hell, I can't believe I'm about to say this.* "Thank you, but I'm sorry. I can't take the job."

Try Me

CHAPTER FOUR

Dan looked annoyed. "*What?*"

Okay, he had a right to be pissed after he went to all the trouble of setting this up for me. "I don't think I could do this with a partner," I said apologetically. Not a human one, anyway.

"Mike just showed you why you need one," Dan said, sounding exasperated.

Yes, and it was a good lesson. I needed to pay more attention to my surroundings. Well, Fang would help with that. "I know, but—"

The lieutenant interrupted, looking thoughtful. "Val, could I have a moment alone with you?"

Why not? The guy had been nice enough to offer me a job. Least I could do was hear him out. "Sure."

"Good. Hank, Mike, you can head on out. Dan, you might want to come back a little later."

The guys all nodded and the lieutenant gestured me to follow him. He closed the door to his office and waved me toward a seat. He didn't even carp when Fang flopped down at my feet. I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but this must be what Jen felt like when she was sent to the principal's office.

I glanced around. Heck, the principal's office had to be nicer than this. Cheap wall paneling, scarred linoleum, battered metal desk and ancient chairs . . . the department obviously wasn't spending a whole lot of money on its Special Crimes Unit.

Lieutenant Ramirez rubbed his forehead wearily. "Now, suppose you tell me the real reason you turned the job down."

I glanced at Fang. *I don't suppose you can read his mind?*

NO. IT ONLY WORKS WITH DEMONS, VAMPIRES, THAT SORT OF THING.

Implying he'd met *other* sorts of things? But I let that slide for now and tried to figure out how to answer Ramirez.

When I hesitated, he added, "And why you seem to have a hellhound as a partner."

Fang and I exchanged surprised glances. "What do you mean?" I asked cautiously. Was he using "hellhound" as a figure of speech, or . . . ?

He glanced again at Fang. "Well, part-hellhound, anyway. The purple eye-flash when he took on Mike Fenton was a dead giveaway."

"Oh." *Not* a figure of speech.

"And so was yours when you fought Hank."

I squirmed in my seat. "So, you know what I am?"

"I know you're part demon, which is why you're able to do what you do."

"Uh, doesn't the *special crimes* unit hunt demons?"

He gave me a wry half smile. "Not the law-abiding ones. We're here to serve and protect, not make judgments."

Well that was a relief, but he sounded pretty calm about the whole existence of demons thing. "Do the others know, too?"

"No. The guys have a hard enough time dealing with the thought of vampires. Demons haven't become a threat, so until they do, I'm keeping my unit on a need-to-know basis."

"Then you understand why I don't want a partner. He's gonna have a lot of questions about how I can do what I do."

Ramirez nodded. "I'll handle that, let him know that I know why you're so talented without revealing your background." He cocked his head. "Let me guess . . . succubus, right?"

I gaped at him. "How did you know?"

He smiled. "Need-to-know basis again."

"Then you know why I don't want a male partner."

"In theory," Ramirez conceded. "But you seem to have it under control, and if I understand right, the hunt satisfies the lust cravings."

"Yes, but—"

"Just hear me out, okay?"

When I nodded, he went on to explain how the vampires were a small minority whose population had grown significantly larger in the area about a year ago—large enough to come to the attention of the San Antonio Police Department. Gaining incredible power, speed, immortality, and the ability to control mortal minds seemed to strip them of all moral judgment, so they were fast becoming the city's biggest crime problem. The SCU's job was to stop them, by whatever means possible.

Wow, I hadn't realized all this. I'd just been in my own little world, killing vamps and trying to keep Lola under control. No wonder he looked so strained. "How can you stop them at all?"

"We often don't," Ramirez said baldly. "That's how Dan lost his last partner, and why I've attended so many funerals lately. It's also why you don't see them going through the court system . . . or the hospital. They resist arrest—violently. The only way we've found to stop them is to kill them before they kill us."

Fang approved. THAT'S THE BEST WAY TO DEAL WITH A VAMPIRE.

Ramirez continued. "The key is not to let them take over your mind. And there appear to be three types of people who are able to resist."

Curious, I asked, "What kind?"

"First, those who are very devout. Regardless of your religion, having a deep, personal relationship with a deity seems to make you immune to having your mind taken over."

Surprised, I asked, "How many of those do you have?"

"Not very many. They don't usually gravitate toward law enforcement as a career. The majority fall in the second bracket—those with very strong emotions. Anger, rage, or just plain bullheaded stubbornness seems to make them unable to control your mind."

I nodded. "Like the guys I just met."

"Right. And the third are part-demons—people like you."

Surprised, I asked, "You have others like me in your unit?"

"Not yet, but I'd like to. Three men—*good* men—died over the last six months, just doing their job. If more of them had the advantages you do, I wouldn't have to tell their families they died in the line of duty. I wouldn't have to watch more of them being buried." He speared me with a glance. "I really don't want to attend any more funerals."

Crap. Taking vamps on *mano a mano* was one thing, but having responsibility for other people's lives . . . was I ready for that? I was still only eighteen.

Ramirez grimaced. "The number of vampire kills has tripled in the last few months and we're short-handed. Plus, members of the unit have been hearing about a vein of vampires forming together to plan something."

A *vein* of vampires? I hadn't heard them called that. *Em*. "Vampires cooperating? That's new." They were usually so self-involved and tripping on their own power that they didn't play well with others.

"Yeah," Ramirez said. "But it can't be good. The sudden rise in vampire kills could be related to this new group. I'm hoping you can work with Dan to locate them, find out if they're behind this sudden rash of murders and if they are, stop them."

Like it was that easy. "Uh, it's not like I chat up the undead before I stake them."

"You don't have to. Just continue doing what you have been doing. The only difference is that you may run into small groups of them instead of individuals, which is why you need a partner. I wouldn't normally hire someone your age, but with your experience and advantages, we could really use you."

I frowned. I'd only gone after them one-on-one before, so this would be a bit more complicated. Sure, I could kill vampires for them, but did I want to? It would let Lola have more control. Could I handle it without revealing my secret to the world? "I'm not sure . . ."

"We need you," Ramirez said baldly. "And I have special hiring authority for this unit. You won't have to go through the normal hiring and training process, though of course, you'll work night shift. If you work with us, your pay won't be great, but it won't be minimum wage either. Plus, we offer medical, dental, vacation time, retirement—a complete benefits package."

I hadn't even thought about that stuff, but I guessed it was important in the grown-up world. I glanced at Fang. *What do you think?*

He looked thoughtful. DO THEY HIRE DOGS?

I grinned. "Fang and I come as a package deal. He wants to know if you can put him on the payroll."

The lieutenant looked surprised, but took the question seriously. "I don't think I can justify that, but I can provide you with identification that gives you special dispensation to take him anywhere you want, like a service dog or working police dog."

TAKE IT. YOU NEED THE MONEY TO FIND US DECENT DIGS . . . AND KEEP ME IN PIZZA.

He was right. I needed a job of some kind, and my bout with Horowitz made me more confident I could keep Lola under wraps when necessary. Plus the fact that Ramirez knew what I was—and was okay with it—made me feel a lot better about the whole thing. "Okay, I'll do it."

He beamed at me. "Great. Want to start work tonight?"

Now? He sure didn't waste any time. He must really be desperate.

OOH. FUN AND GAMES.

Well, if Fang was up for it, why not? Otherwise, we'd just have to return to that pit of a hotel room. "Sure."

He came around and opened the door. Dan was sitting outside, a pink bakery box in his hands. "Good—you're here. You ready to show your new partner the ropes?" he asked Dan.

"Yes, sir." Dan looked surprised but pleased, like he liked the idea of working with me. It made me feel kind of warm inside.

"Excellent," Ramirez said. "We need as many people as we can get and her skills will make her an excellent partner for you. Her dog will be a good asset, too. Make sure you take him with you."

I thanked the lieutenant and joined Dan in the hall. Ramirez wished us luck and sent us on our way.

"Here," Dan said awkwardly as we walked down the hall. "This is for you." He handed me the pink box.

"For me?" What was it? I opened it cautiously, not sure if this was some rookie razzing ceremony or what.

Nope—it was a cake, with the words, "Happy birthday, Val" scrawled in pink across the chocolate frosting. It even had pink and yellow flowers on it. Geez—he must have run right out after the sparring and bought it.

I stopped short. I hadn't expected to get a birthday cake from anyone on this lousy day, let alone a total stranger. The words on the cake blurred as I went all misty-eyed.

Crap. Why had he gone and done that? Now I was gonna cry in front of my new partner and he'd think I was a total *girl*.

AWWWW, HOW SWEET. HE LIKES YOU—HE REALLY LIKES YOU.

Fang's sarcasm yanked me out of my pity party. I shot him a glare but was privately glad he'd helped me find a way to buck up. "Thank you, Dan. That's very nice of you," I said, careful not to gush or blubber all over him. Maybe he wouldn't notice that my voice cracked, just a little.

Dan shrugged. "I figure everyone deserves a cake on their birthday. Consider it a welcome to the unit." We started walking again and he added, "Besides, the guys will love you forever if you share."

I grinned. "You got it."

Dan showed me to the break room and introduced me around to the guys who were just going on shift. They seemed surprised by my age and appearance, but when Dan told them how I'd kicked Hank's butt and taken down a vamp on my own, they obviously decided to take a wait and see attitude. That was okay—I knew I'd have to earn their respect and I didn't have a problem with that. At least Dan made sure I had the opportunity.

It helped that I'd brought the cake and Fang—they were both big hits. As I left the break room, I felt suddenly a whole lot more optimistic about my future. I might have even found a place I could belong.

Dan had me fill out some paperwork and got me a locker, then said, "Ready?"

"Sure."

He led us outside to a huge, silver Dodge Ram with an extended cab and covered storage bed.

"Whoa," I said. "This is a step up from the unmarked car you had last night."

"Yeah, well, teams get them—they're specially built. The doors and windows are lined with vampire-repelling silver and the bed cover comes in handy in case we stake any vamps."

Cool. That was a lot better than the trunk of Rick's old car. And this must be where the department's money went—into the fancy ambulances and other stuff necessary to keep the cops safe. I approved.

I hopped in and Fang seemed to have springs in his legs as he easily made the jump to the running board then the seat.

Dan got in the driver's seat and glanced at Fang. "So why are you bringing the pooch along?"

POOCH? Fang repeated incredulously. DID HE JUST CALL ME A POOCH?

"This *pooch* helped me take down a vamp last night."

YEAH. TAKE THAT, DOUGHNUT BREATH.

Dan smirked. "Oh, yeah? How? By holding the stake for you?"

"No, by holding onto the vamp's 'nads—with his teeth."

Dan winced.

"Don't worry. Fang knows you're a friend. Don't you?"

YEAH, SURE. WHATEVER.

But he wagged his tail at Dan just to reassure the guy.

"So we're doing on-the-job training then?"

"Yeah, but first, let me make sure we're on the same page. You probably know all this already, but just to make sure, let's take a refresher."

As they sat in the truck, he lectured me about vampire speed, their ability to cloud minds, how to kill them, yadda, yadda, yadda.

Finally, he broke off and said, "Are you even listening to me?"

Bored, I said, "Yeah, I get it. You shove something pointy in their hearts, drag them into the sunlight, or cut off their heads . . . if you just happen to have a sword handy. I know this already."

SMALL CHILDREN KNOW THIS, Fang thought contemptuously.

"Okay, fine. You don't want to listen, let's go."

As he started the truck, I asked, "How do you decide where to go?"

He shrugged. "We sometimes get details about names, appearance, favorite hang-outs, that sort of thing. If there are no details, we go looking for them in the areas where they tend to congregate. If they're law-abiding, we leave them alone. If they attack us or someone else, they're fair game."

"How do you get this information?"

"From Ramirez."

"Where does he get it?"

Dan gave me a surprised look. "Good question. I don't know, though I've wondered, too. I figure he has an informant—someone inside this vein of vampires we're supposed to find."

Made sense. "Do you have a target in mind?"

"Yeah." He pulled out his notebook and flipped through it. "I've been keeping track of the hot spots, places where the SCU has found victims but no perp yet."

"Where's that?"

"There's a place on the west side that's seen some activity . . ."

As he drove, he resumed the vampire quiz. "So, how do vampires feel about silver?"

Remembering how nice he'd been to get me a cake, I played along. "It burns like hell when it touches their skin."

"How about garlic?"

"A tasty food seasoning, if you don't mind the odor."

He grinned. "Crosses?"

"If you believe, they can help."

"Holy water?"

"Like acid." Providing the priest believed, of course.

"Mirrors?"

"Reflect vampires just like everyone else. Though it's painful for them to look into the old ones with silver backing."

"How about the invitation thing?"

"That's true—they can't enter a place unless they've been invited. Of course, they can enter public places, which are an open invitation to anyone."

"Can they make themselves invisible? Change into bats? Fly?"

I shook my head. "All myths. But what they can do is cloud your mind, make you *think* they can do all that. That's where most people get caught. They can make you freeze in place until they drain you dry."

He made a noncommittal noise. "So, how many have you staked?"

I didn't know—I never counted. "Uh, maybe thirty or so." Probably more, but that would sound like bragging. "How about you?"

"Two," he admitted.

All of two? Oh, great. Who was the real rookie here? And he'd lost his partner recently, too. Whose fault was that? Sourly, I asked, "So, do I pass?"

"You pass."

Gee, don't do me any favors.

He pulled over, parking the truck in the shadows of a seedy area on the west side. The outskirts of San Antonio, consisting primarily of military bases and newer housing developments, weren't nearly as picturesque as the older, historic center. And here, on the crime-ridden west side, the area was mostly industrial with a few office buildings establishing a tentative toehold on the blight. It didn't look as bad in the daytime, but with several street lights burned out or shot out, it looked sinister on this dark night. And it wasn't safe for normal folks at any time of the day.

"This the place?" I asked.

"Yeah. Someone's been killing people in this five-block area.

"Okay, what's the plan?"

"How would you feel about serving as bait?"

Fang's mouth dropped open in a grin. HERE, FISHIE, FISHIE.

It made sense—especially since I seemed to have more experience here. And of the two of us, I looked more harmless. "Sure, I'll play bait."

"Are you armed?"

"Why do think I wear vests? They hide the stakes I keep in a special holster in my back waistband." I took one out and showed it to him. "Just in case."

He hefted it. "Nice. But maybe I should—"

Exasperated, I interrupted him. "Look, you know I can handle myself. If I get in trouble, then you can ride to the rescue. For now, just stay here and . . . watch the dog."

WATCH THE DOG? HEY, I'M YOUR PARTNER.

Yeab, but a vampire is less likely to think I'm helpless if I have you with me. Then I wouldn't be good bait, would I?

Fang conceded the point, but Dan just gave me a long, level look. "That kind of attitude could get you killed."

My face warmed. My mouth always got me into trouble. "Sorry. I'm just not used to working with a partner."

He nodded. "Don't worry. I have your back."

Feeling a little chastised, I got out of the truck and walked off, leaving Dan and Fang alone together.

As I walked swiftly away from the truck, I tried to change my demeanor. No more confident kick-butt vampire hunter. Instead, I hunched my shoulders, let my eyes dart about with wary glances, and checked my watch every couple of minutes as if waiting for someone who was very late. The perfect victim.

I lingered for about half an hour, but nothing happened. As I checked my watch for the hundredth time, I heard Fang yell VAL! from the truck, then he barked for good measure.

I whirled around to see Dan standing outside the truck and an overweight middle-aged blonde regarding him like a midnight snack. Despite the chilly weather, she wore nothing but black leather pants and a tight, laced leather vest that made the pale flesh of her breasts bulge out the sides and top and emphasized the muffin top on her stomach. Gross. Was the smashed cleavage, overstuffed sausage look in these days?

But I didn't want to overreact, in case she wasn't a vamp. She hadn't tried to enthrall me, so I wasn't sure yet. She might just be a skank on the prowl.

She leered at him, showing long pointed incisors. "Hello, handsome." Beckoning with one pudgy finger, she said, "Come to Charlene."

With the speed of a rattlesnake, she darted forward and sank her fangs into his neck. Then, grabbing his butt with both hands, she ground her hips against him and sucked.

Not just a skank. The demon lust surged within me and I rushed toward them, but Fang leapt out of the cab and got there first. He clamped on to her heel, evidently trying to hamstring her.

She released Dan to shriek and bat at Fang. "Pick on someone your own size," I said and punched Charlene in the face. Not that I was anywhere near her size, thank heavens.

That got her attention.

"You stupid bitch." Charlene rushed me, her claws extended to scratch my face or gouge out my eyes, I wasn't sure which.

I'd never fought a vamp who fought like a girl before—she kicked and screamed and pulled my hair. I held my own, but I couldn't quite reach my stakes—I was too busy holding her claws away from my face.

Fang darted in and out, doing damage where he could. Dan was no help—he seemed too dazed to comprehend what was going on. Holding Charlene's wrists away from my face, I yelled, "Stake her!"

That woke him up. He yanked a stake out of his jacket and buried it in Charlene's back, aiming for the heart.

Unfortunately, the stake went in at an angle and didn't reach its destination through all the fat. Where was a sledgehammer when you needed one?

Charlene screeched and tried to reach around to her back to pull it out. That gave me the perfect opening. I whipped out my weapon and stabbed the vamp right in her black heart. Charlene dropped and lay motionless. As I rose slowly to my feet, I concentrated on putting Lola back in her prison. With Charlene vanquished, it was fairly easy.

Dan stood over the vamp, holding his hand to his neck and looking a little stunned.

"What's the matter?"

"I—I've never been bitten before. I don't know anyone who did and survived." He lifted his hand away from his neck to reveal two neat punctures on his neck and blood on his hand. He was clearly wondering if he was going to turn into a vampire now.

"Don't worry, you won't turn out like her." I paused to consider. "Well, not unless you shrink six inches, gain fifty pounds, have a sex change operation, and lose all fashion sense."

A spark flickered in his eyes—annoyance. I shrugged. "But you won't become a vampire unless you drink her blood, too." I glanced down at the corpse in black leather. "You could try it if you want, but I don't know if it'll work now that she's dead."

"I'll pass."

Good—he was handling it just fine. I saw him fidget with the crotch of his pants, looking uncomfortable. Guessing the source of his discomfort, I said, "Now you know why so many people find the vampire embrace so irresistible." Some of them enthralled their victims so they felt nothing but unbridled lust. Apparently, Charlene was one of them.

"That was mind control? She *made* me feel that way?"

It was obvious he already knew the answer and just wanted reassurance. "Yeah. I take it she wasn't exactly your type?"

"Not hardly. My God, that . . . that's rape."

If he felt that way about the vampire, imagine how he would feel about a succubus . . . I made a noncommittal noise.

He looked thoughtful. "They don't do that to all their victims, though."

"Not all. Actually, you were lucky that she wanted you to feel desire. Some like to feed on the fear as well as the blood. Some . . . just like to kill."

He glanced down at the dead vamp, as if trying to figure out if he felt lucky or not. His mouth hardened. "We need to make sure the rest of the unit knows about this."

GO AHEAD, KICK HER, Fang thought at an oblivious Dan. YOU KNOW YOU WANT TO.

My partner still seemed a little out of it, probably some lingering effect from Charlene's mind control. To goad him back to normal, I said, "You wouldn't have had to go through it at all if you'd stayed in the truck."

His head came up and I saw anger in his eyes. Good—he'd snapped back.

"We wouldn't have caught her otherwise," he said. "You weren't exactly her type. Besides, Fang and I were bored." He glanced down at the dog. "Thanks, pal."

The dog deserved thanks—without Fang's warning, I might not have known Dan was in trouble until it was too late.

Fang stared up at Dan with his tongue lolling out, looking like a normal dog. YOU OWE ME BIG TIME, *PAL*.

I stifled an urge to laugh. Fang and I had a lot in common—both part demon, both trying to pass as something else. We were doing a good job of it, too, but it was a hell of a way to live. "So, what's next? Pack her in the back of the truck or call the ambulance pick-up unit?"

"The pick-up unit is for when we're on our own . . . or have to rush off somewhere else. Normally, we toss them in the back."

He drove the truck up next to the vamp, and we both wrestled her into the back, then joined Fang in the front. Dan pulled out a baby wipe and cleaned his neck, staring at the blood on it for a moment.

"Vampires are disease-resistant," I said casually. "You shouldn't need a disinfectant but you might like a bandage. Do you have a first aid kit handy?"

"Yeah, there's one in the back, but I'll take care of it later," Dan said.

He went silent, so I tried to divert his attention from what he'd just been through. "Hey, do you know someplace I can rent, cheap? Fang isn't crazy about the roach motel I picked out for tonight."

I was just trying to distract Dan, but he took the question seriously. "Well, as a matter of fact, my sister Gwen is looking for a roommate."

His sister? That sounded just a bit too cozy. "Uh, I hadn't planned on rooming with anyone—what with the crazy night hours I keep and uh, Fang . . . he . . . he sheds all over everything."

WELL, EXCUUUUSE ME, Fang said indignantly. I TOLD YOU I COULDN'T HELP THAT,

Relax—I'm just using you as an excuse.

"No biggie," Dan said. "Gwen's a nurse at the hospital so she has crazy night hours, too. And she loves dogs. She won't mind a little hair."

HA. THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR USING INNOCENT LITTLE HELLHOUNDS TO FURTHER YOUR NEFARIOUS PLANS.

Try Me

Sheesh—what made me think it'd be fun to have this dog around? His snarky nature was coming out now. And how could I refuse Dan's generous offer without looking like an ingrate?

I couldn't. "Okay, thanks."

"Great—I'll call her."

Yeah, wonderful. But with any luck, she'd hate me on sight, or take an aversion to Fang.

FAT CHANCE. LOOKS LIKE YOU AND I ARE GONNA HAVE A ROOMIE.

Try Me

CHAPTER FIVE

It was hard to sleep the next morning, what with all the noise of people checking out. About noon, someone slammed a door in the next room over and I gave up. I'd only had a few hours of actual shuteye, but I didn't need much.

The only problem was, I didn't want to move. Fang had crawled under the sheet and was curled up next to me, as close as he could get without actually being on top of me. It was kind of adorable. His snarky attitude must be a façade.

YEAH, JUST KEEP TELLING YOURSELF THAT, SISTER.

But he licked my hand and snuggled even closer.

A short knock came at the door and it opened suddenly, surprising me.

Fang was out from under the sheet in a flash and growling at the Latina who stood in the doorway, holding towels.

She shrieked and slammed the door shut, letting loose with a stream of rapid-fire Spanish.

As my heartbeat tried to get back to normal, I said, "Geez, Fang, overreact much? It was just the maid."

Since it was daylight—time for all good little vampires to be in bed—I hadn't been worried. Anyone else I could handle.

WHY DIDN'T YOU PUT OUT THE "DO NOT DISTURB" SIGN?

Because I hadn't thought of it. I didn't spend much time in hotel rooms. "Why didn't you?" I countered.

FLASH—NO HANDS, GENIUS.

Okay, he had a point, but he could have reminded me.

Oh well, no biggie—we were moving anyway, just as soon as I settled where we'd be living. I showered and dressed and let Fang out to do his thing. It was almost time to meet Dan's sister and I'd already paid for one night in this flea trap—I wasn't paying for any more. So, I tied my duffel on the back of the motorcycle, put Fang on the front, and left to meet Dan, grabbing burgers on the way for both of us. Fang liked burgers, too—go figure.

I'd just have to find a way to put Dan off until I could find a suitable place on my own. I wasn't really against having a roommate, but it would be hard enough keeping my demon nature from my partner. The thought of also having to keep it hidden where I lived sounded like a real pain.

But when I pulled up to the place, my heart sank. It was about as far away from the hotel we'd stayed in last night as you could get. Centrally located, it looked fairly new, with rounded adobe architecture, well-kept grounds, a pool, gym, walking paths under big shady oak trees . . . just the kind of place I'd love to live.

FACE IT—YOU'RE TOAST.

Not yet. After all, this wasn't the only place to live in San Antonio.

Dan waved me down and I parked where he indicated. He looked amused when I unzipped Fang from my vest. "Does he always ride there?"

"Yeah, but I'm thinking of getting a sidecar for him." Just as soon as I could afford it.

GOOD PLAN. THERE IS SUCH A THING AS TOO MUCH TOGETHERNESS.

"Are these apartments or condos?" I asked.

"Townhouses—she's renting one from the owner who had to move to another state. But the advantage is that most people own theirs so you get a more stable population here."

"Oh."

IT JUST SOUNDS BETTER AND BETTER.

"Well, come on and meet Gwen."

Gwen opened the door. She didn't look a lot like her brother. A couple of years younger than Dan, she had red hair cut short in a tousled 'do. She immediately dropped to a crouch to beam at Fang. "How cute. Can I pet him? Is he friendly?"

I looked down at the hellhound. *Are you?* I really didn't know how he'd react to others.

In answer, he nudged Gwen's hand with his nose, as if asking to be petted.

Shameless beggar. Why couldn't you help me out here and growl at her?

As Gwen oohed and ahed over the dog, even saying his name was cute, Fang said, I LIKE TO BE PETTED. AND I LIKE HER.

Unfortunately, I liked her, too. She was outgoing and bubbly as she showed me around the place. The unit had two bedrooms, separated for privacy, two baths, and a kitchen that was way nicer than Mom's. She had it decorated with a lot of bright colors and cool funky accessories. Plus it had a door that let out onto a nice patio and beyond to an open area where Fang could roam free if he wanted.

It was perfect. Damn. Trying to find a reason to turn it down, I said, "Great kitchen, but I don't cook."

"No biggie," Gwen said cheerfully. "I do—and I'd love to cook for more than one. Plus I bake whenever I can. You'd just need to help clean up and pay for half the groceries. Oh, and provide your own furniture for your bedroom. I have everything else."

That sounded reasonable, but I wasn't looking for reasonable. I was looking for a reason to turn it down. "I work nights."

"So do I," Gwen said with a smile. "And this place is quiet in the daytime."

"I don't know if I can afford it." It was way nicer than I'd expected.

"Your motorcycle is paid for and you're too young to have any real debt," Dan said. "I know what Ramirez will be paying you. Trust me, you can handle it—and still afford to buy the sidecar for Fang."

Oh, great, there went that excuse. "Fang sheds a lot," I said apologetically.

She waved that away as if it were inconsequential. "Oh, I'm used to dog hair. We always had it around the house growing up. I've just been so busy with school then my job that I haven't had a chance to get a dog yet." She glanced at Fang. "He seems very well-behaved. You can even get one of those dog doors to put in the patio door so he can go out when he wants."

NOW WE'RE TALKING.

She smiled at me. "Please take it. We'll have fun."

How could I get out of this gracefully, without hurting anyone's feelings? "I don't know . . ."

"Excuse us," Dan said to his sister and pulled me outside onto the patio. He shut the door while Fang stayed inside with Gwen. "What's your problem?" He sounded irritated.

I shrugged. "This is the first place I've seen. I just want to keep my options open."

"Come on—you and I both know you won't get a better deal. What's your real beef? You got something against my sister?"

"Of course not." To tell the truth, I envied the easy, loving relationship the two obviously had together.

"Then why? This place is perfect for you and you know it."

Annoyed, I gave him part of the reason. "Yeah, it would be, if I didn't suspect you were doing it to keep an eye on me. I don't need a big brother, you know."

He snorted. "Obviously. That's not why I want you here."

"Then why?"

"So you can keep an eye on Gwen for me. I worry about *her*. She works nights at the ER, and sees a lot of things she shouldn't."

"Like what?"

"Like fang marks on victims. She's too damned stubborn to find another job, and doesn't want to ask her big brother for help. I'd feel a whole lot better if she had someone living with her she could count on in case of trouble. Someone like you."

Oh. He was asking me for a favor. Shoot, that put a whole new spin on things. After all, the guy had gotten me a job, not to mention a birthday cake. I owed him. And I did like the place . . . and Gwen. But could I live here and still keep my secret safe?

Fang scratched at the patio door and glared at me through the glass. The glass didn't stop his thoughts, though. TAKE IT.

Well, shoot, I was outnumbered. And the thought of searching for another place—or living anywhere else—was depressing. Heck, why not? It would be nice to be able to tell Mom that I didn't need her and that I'd found a job and a really nice place to live all on my own. Maybe even something resembling a family.

No—don't go there. Accepting human-Val didn't mean they'd accept demon-Val.

I opened the patio door so both Dan and Gwen could hear. "Okay, you got a deal."

"Good," Gwen said with a happy bounce. "It'll be fun—and Dan lives close by so you can share a ride to work together."

Close by? Had I just been conned? But when I raised an eyebrow at Dan, he muttered for my ears only, "Not close enough. My place is on the other side of the complex. It's not like I can watch her place all night or anything."

Okay, I could see that. Especially since he knew exactly what kind of things roamed the night streets of San Antonio.

I nodded and Gwen said, "Let's go shopping!"

I grinned. I'd never had girlfriends to shop with, just Mom and Jen. It sounded like fun—another new adventure.

I left my duffel at Gwen's, but Fang didn't want to have anything to do with shopping, so he elected to stay and check out his new digs. Mom, Rick, and Jen were all working at the store, so Gwen and Dan helped me pick up my bedroom furniture, then Gwen—a serious shopper—insisted on helping me buy sheets, towels, and the dog door for Fang.

Even better, I found something cooler than a sidecar at the motorcycle shop. When I got back to the townhouse, I called Fang to try it out. They had a sheepskin-lined leather bucket seat sort of thing with a harness, and they'd attached it to the back of my Valkyrie for me. Fang jumped up into it and turned around a few times, scratching at the sheepskin, then settled in.

THIS'LL WORK, he said approvingly. BUT I WON'T NEED THE STRAPS.

"Here, I got you these, too."

I slid a pair of brown leather goggles on his head. "These'll keep the wind and grit out of your eyes."

HOW DO I LOOK?

Cool. Very cool.

Dan laughed. "All he needs is a hood and a long scarf trailing behind him to look like Snoopy chasing the Red Baron."

Fang pawed at the goggles. I DON'T WANT TO LOOK LIKE SOME STUPID CARTOON BEAGLE.

You don't, I assured him. *Besides, they're practical.* Out loud, I said, "Well, I think he looks cute. All the other dogs will be jealous and want one. Don't you think so, Gwen?"

Gwen nodded. "Totally."

Now that Gwen had agreed with me, Fang said, OKAY, I CAN LIVE WITH CUTE.

But it was now time to go to work and it made sense for the three of us to ride to work together in Dan's SUV—a Toyota Highlander. It wasn't as large as the SCU truck, but very roomy. At some point, I'd have to look at buying a car of my own. A motorcycle wasn't always practical.

At the station, we got into the SCU truck after the shift briefing. It felt kind of weird to have a job other than at the bookstore, but I was more than ready for it. "So where do we start looking for this vein of vampires?"

Dan thought a minute and flipped through his notebook to check his notes. He was extremely thorough—I learned he had notes from all the previous shift briefings and worked after hours to cross-reference them and keep track of trends all over the city. "Let's head south."

As he put the vehicle in gear and headed in that direction, I asked, "What do you expect to find?"

"I don't have any notes on multiple perps, except maybe in one area. Let's check it out."

He drove to a neighborhood most people would steer clear of this time of night. With all the graffiti on the buildings, it looked like gang territory. In defiance of the chilly weather, some guys, mostly Hispanic dudes wearing gang colors, were playing basketball in a schoolyard court.

Dan nodded toward them. "If anyone knows about a gang of vamps working the area, it'll be another gang."

"And what makes you think they'll tell you anything?"

"I know a couple of these kids. Why don't you stay here while I ask them a few questions?"

"Yeah, like you stayed when I asked you to. Not a chance." I got out, but figured it was safer for Fang to stay in the truck. Though vampires were evil, they were a known quantity. Gangbangers could be psychotic, unpredictable.

NO CHALLENGE, Fang said, sounding bored, so I left him in the truck and followed Dan to the chain link fence.

"Heads up," one of them said.

They all stopped playing and turned to give Dan stone-faced glares. It didn't seem to faze him. "Hey, Julio," he called through the fence.

One of the guys, a short wiry dark-skinned kid with a do-rag tied around his head, swaggered over. Julio looked me up and down, obviously liking what he saw. He rubbed his crotch and leered at me. "Nice piece—"

"I don't think you want to finish that sentence," Dan interrupted. "Val kicked the crap out of a guy twice her size the other day and all he did was look at her wrong. You don't want to piss her off."

Not strictly accurate, but I gave him points for trying. And Lola wasn't even tempted.

Julio glanced at me and I tried to look like a gangsta from the 'hood, but when Fang gave a mental snort I could hear even from here, I realized I just couldn't pull it off. I settled for giving him a predator's smile and letting the demon flash in my eyes.

Good—that unsettled him. It always disturbed them when I showed no fear.

"Whatcha want?" Julio asked, swiftly covering his unease. "We ain't done nothin'."

I really doubted that, but Dan said, "All we want to do is ask you some questions."

Julio glanced back at his friends as if for support and said, "We don't know nothin' neither."

"Not even about a new gang moving in to your territory?" Dan asked.

"Don't know nothin' 'bout no new gang. And iffen they come here, they won't stay for long. We'll take care of 'em."

There was a chorus of agreement from behind him—idiot boys posturing for each other, parading their machismo.

"These are different. They kill people for no reason—three in this area last month. They leave marks like these." Dan peeled back the collar of his shirt and showed them where the vamp had bitten him.

Julio was impassive, but one guy behind him said softly, "Them's the same marks they found on Hector's body."

"You know who done that?" Julio asked Dan.

"Not yet. But we intend to find out. You know of any groups around here who might do something like that?"

Most of the boys shook their heads, but Julio looked thoughtful then nodded toward a notice taped to a pole. "How 'bout them? That just went up an hour ago."

The poster advertised a rally for the New Blood Movement. They invited all humans to come take part and meet real vampires, help them enter the mainstream. It was scheduled for the first day of *Los Días de los Muertes*—the Days of the Dead— on the first of November, four days from now.

How . . . cute. During the Days of the Dead, it was supposed to be easier for the dead to visit the living, and the living used the time to honor their deceased loved ones. Having vampires co-opt the holiday for their own purpose just seemed wrong, even if it wasn't *my* holiday. Then again, the way the poster was worded, it was unclear if they were for real . . . or just playacting.

"It's worth a look-see," I said.

Dan nodded and tore the poster off. "Thanks," he said to Julio.

As we headed back to the truck, someone called out, "Take 'em down, man."

Dan glanced back over his shoulder and gave them a casual wave. "Count on it."

As we got back in the truck, he said, "So, are you going to tell me how you can, as they put it, take the vamps down so easily, or are you going to continue keeping me in the dark?"

"I'm not keeping you in the dark. We've talked about this," I said warily, playing dumb.

"You know what I'm asking. Why are you unafraid to confront gangbangers . . . or fangbangers? Able to take down a guy twice your size? Having thirty vampire kills to your credit at only eighteen?" He raised an eyebrow at me. "Not exactly your normal teenaged girl."

DOESN'T TAKE A GENIUS TO FIGURE THAT OUT.

I knew he'd be suspicious. "Just a fluke of nature, I guess." When he snorted, I decided to give him something a little more plausible. "You know my parents run a new age bookstore?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, we found this book on vampires that must have been written about real ones 'cause it explained a lot about their strengths and weaknesses. Plus, I've had a lot of practice—done a lot of training." To keep him off balance, I said, "You could use some yourself."

I expected that to piss him off, but instead, he said, "Yeah, I could."

I glanced at him in surprise. "You think?" It seemed too easy.

"Yeah, well, Charlene was a wake-up call. I thought I could handle anything, but she showed me I can't."

Charlene? Oh yeah, the vamp who'd played tonsil-hockey with him.

He shifted uneasily, and I wondered if he was uncomfortable remembering the lust she'd brought to life in him.

Curious, I asked, "How long have you been doing this?"

"I've only been in the SCU for a few months. My former partner was training me, but he got . . ." He trailed off, staring into the distance, his expression bleak.

FANGED TO DEATH? SUCKED DRY? BUTCHERED?

"Dead?" I asked, which sounded better than Fang's alternatives.

"Yeah, he got dead—killed by one of those monsters." The expression on his face was murderous. "No one should die like that. These things shouldn't be allowed to exist, and I want to kill every last one of them." He turned to me. "Can you help me do that, give me some pointers?"

Impressed by his willingness to be taught by a girl, I said, "Sure." Then felt immediately uncertain. Could I do it okay? After all, I'd never taught anyone before. I'd always been taught, by martial arts teachers and Rick. That was it—I'd teach him the way Rick taught me.

"Good."

The next few days fell into a kind of routine as I settled in to my new life. Fang and I slept until about noon, hung out with Gwen—who turned out to be a great cook—during the early afternoon, then trained with Dan during the late afternoon and hunted down other leads at night.

I taught Dan how to counter their superhuman speed with everything I could think of. Most martial arts took too long to master, so I didn't try to teach him any, though I recommended he find a class in the relatively unknown swords form of Tai Chi for the future. Not only were the long pointy things great to keep your distance from the undead, but they came in quite handy for lopping heads off. That was, if you could find a way to carry them around without alarming the rest of the population.

Luckily, he took to the crossbow like a natural. Unfortunately they weren't a great option since they were only good if he was able to catch the vamps at a distance, plus the weapons were just a tad conspicuous to carry on the street. So, for close-in fighting, Dan carried silver and small vials of holy water besides the stakes.

He started wearing heavy silver around his neck, wrists, and waist. Though he wore most of his metal under a turtleneck, he took some teasing about his new look from the other scuzzies. But Dan was smart—he didn't see it as jewelry, just weaponry that would help keep him alive.

On the fourth afternoon of our training at the station gym, I pretended to be a vampire and rushed Dan, catching him in a clinch. The last time I'd done that, he'd been unable to reach any of the weapons inside his jacket and had "died."

But this time he was ready. He flipped a stake out of the special harness he'd rigged in one sleeve and a vial out of the other. He popped the cork off the vial with his thumb in a swift motion and dumped it in my face. When I blinked in surprise, he brought the stake down to within millimeters from my heart.

Grinning, Dan said, "Your face is eaten up by holy water and there's a stake in your heart. You're dead, Madame Vampire."

GOTCHA!

Excellent. Even Fang sounded like he was coming to approve of Dan. But lingering with the guy on top of me after the "kill" was a bad idea. Our energy fields merged seamlessly and I had a mental vision of Lola popping her cork, oozing out of her bottle to let me know she was a whole lot interested in the very nice male body plastered against mine. Unfortunately, that part was in the physical realm.

And, from the odd expression on Dan's face, he was feeling it, too.

I DON'T THINK THAT'S SUCH A GOOD IDEA . . .

Me either. I was so not ready for this. Guys, dating, making out . . . the thought of it made me feel all mixed up inside. I wasn't sure I even wanted to deal with these human feelings, let alone with what Lola wanted. Especially with Dan. Yeah, he was a total hottie, but he was way more experienced than me, not to mention the fact that he was my partner.

I scooted out from under him immediately, wiping the water from my face. "Good job," I babbled. "I think you're ready to take on a few vampires now." Mentally, I shoved Lola back in the bottle. It took some doing, but I managed it. Dan gave me a knowing look, but I averted my gaze and rolled to my feet. "How's your mental block coming?"

I hadn't been able to help him with that, since I didn't really need or use one, so some of the other SCU operatives had worked with him, giving him some tips and tricks they'd learned the hard way. I had, however, cautiously revealed that I was able to feel it if a vampire tried to enthrall me. Dan just seemed to take it as part of my general weirdness.

"The block is good," Dan said. "It takes a conscious effort to maintain it, but I think it's working. I won't know for sure until a vamp actually tries to use it on me." He rose to his feet. "I'm ready for the rally tonight. How about you?"

Relieved that he hadn't mentioned what had just passed between us, I said, "Sure. Let's do it."

Lola stirred again, eager to get on with it. But was the lust in anticipation of the rally . . . or in reaction to what had just happened with Dan? I wasn't sure, so I'd just have to make sure the rally took care of those pesky needs of my inner demon so she'd keep her greedy hands off my partner.

Try Me

CHAPTER SIX

By the time we reached the large meeting hall near downtown, the rally had already started, so Dan parked near the back exit. Fang sniffed the air and the hair on his neck ruffled as he let out a low growl.

VAMPIRE.

"What's he doing?" Dan asked.

"He smells vampire."

Dan glanced at him in surprise. "I didn't know he could do that."

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW COULD FILL AN ENCYCLOPEDIA.

Give him a break, Fang—he's only human. "He's been training, too."

"Good to know. Can you tell how close they are?"

I listened. "Nothing nearby. Must be the vamps inside."

Dan glanced at Fang. "But this time, you should leave him here. I know the organizers promised complete safety on their flyer, but a small dog in an excited crowd—not good."

I frowned. "You're probably right. But you can never be too careful. Tell you what, Fang. You stay here, and run for help if we need it, okay?"

Dan rolled his eyes. "Geez, I know your dog is smart, but who do you think he is—Lassie?"

I hadn't realized I'd said that out loud. "He's better than Lassie—he can take down a vampire."

DAMN STRAIGHT.

Just not dozens of them. Of course, he was willing to try, but I wasn't willing to lose him in the attempt. And he was smart enough to know he couldn't handle it.

I'LL STAY HERE, BE YOUR BACK-UP.

Good—do that.

Shrugging, Dan led the way into the hall where the rally was in full swing.

The hall had once seen better days as a dinner theater, but now the wooden floor was scuffed and badly in need of polishing. In the harsh lighting, I could see the blood-red velvet curtains framing the stage were worn and shiny in spots. The crowd didn't seem to care, though. Most of those attending were near my age, and the dress of the day seemed to be the Goth or Emo look, with others wearing skeleton or vampire costumes in honor of the occasion.

But the real scary ones were those who wore no costume or make-up at all—the vampires in the crowd. They gave the gathering an edge of danger, the feeling that one wrong word was the only spark it needed to explode.

"This place is a train wreck waiting to happen," Dan muttered.

"Yeah." But with all the security and the public nature of the rally, I hoped it would be all right.

"Any idea how many vamps are here?"

I shook my head. "Can't tell for sure. I can only sense them if they're using their powers. Some of them are, to cloud people's minds about their true appearance. Probably most of them. Not more than twenty or so, I'd say."

"Not as bad as I thought. Can you point one out to me?"

"That one. He's projecting a Goth image. But he's more like a geek caught in the Fifties."

I felt Dan relax beside me. "Good—I see him as he really is—my block must be working."

We watched for a few minutes as a man on a raised stage at the back of the hall spoke to the audience. The vamp, who introduced himself simply as Alejandro, had golden brown skin, long dark brown hair, patrician good looks, and a dramatic black cape that he flourished when he gestured. His seductive voice and charismatic manner were kinda hokey and theatrical, but the crowd ate it up. Though his English was excellent, he had the slight accent and phrasing of a person whose native language was Spanish.

"Yes, vampires are real. But there is no reason to fear, my friends. We in the New Blood Movement wish only to live in harmony with humans. There is no need for fear or strife."

Oh yeah? Tell that to the people they'd sucked dry.

He continued. "We have established blood banks throughout the city where it is easy for humans to make deposits and for vampires to withdraw it as needed." He paused, raising his finger dramatically. "But why should you donate, you ask? It is simple. We will happily reimburse you for this fluid that is so vital to our existence. And it is your choice whether you are reimbursed in cash . . . or in pleasure."

He went on to explain that there was no need for the messy process of sinking fangs into necks and other regions of the body. Unless the human wanted to, of course, then they would arrange discreet rooms to donate blood.

And the suckers—or rather, potential suckees—seemed to be buying it. At least some of them were. Some seemed to think it was a big joke, others scoffed, but the vast majority seemed to be so mesmerized by Alejandro that they didn't even question the fact that he claimed vampires were real.

Dan leaned down. "Can you tell if he's coercing them, using his mind to control their thoughts?"

"It would be impossible to control this many people at once. But I do feel him sending out waves of goodwill, urging trust, cooperation, and acceptance."

He grimaced. "And the susceptible are soaking it up. Let's get closer."

We pushed our way down to the front and a surge in the crowd shoved me up against a vamp standing near the stage. He gave me a lewd look, baring his fangs. Between them and his dreadlocks, he was kind of disgusting.

"Sorry," I said, backing away. Didn't want to start anything. And here, it was too easy for guys to get too close, for our fields to overlap. I edged closer to a knot of girls.

The vamp leered at me. "Don't I know you, sweet thing?"

"Don't think so," I said and turned to face the stage.

Alejandro continued to address the audience, calling upon the unaffiliated vampires in the crowd to join the Movement, to live in harmony with humans and enjoy the perks of having a steady source of sustenance. As for humans, he spouted the benefits and joys of donating blood, hinting at carnal delights for those humans who personally offered up their necks to feed the Movement.

"But enough words," Alejandro finally said. "Let us provide a little demonstration. If my lieutenants would please come to the stage?" He gestured toward the wings.

"Austin . . ." A tall, lean cowboy—complete with the requisite hat, boots, and jeans—joined him, tipping his hat to the crowd. He grinned and the women went nuts. It worked for Marlboro cigarettes, why not the Movement?

"Luis . . ." A handsome Latino joined the cowboy. Wearing a well-trimmed goatee with his long hair clubbed back in a ponytail at the base of his neck, Luis bowed, looking like some sort of historical Spanish aristocrat. He elicited oohs and ahs from the women in the crowd.

"Rosa . . ." A sexy Latina with long flowing hair and a Marilyn Monroe body gave the crowd a come-hither look. The men cheered.

Going by these specimens, you'd think all vampires were totally hot. Talk about false advertising . . .

Alejandro continued, "And, last but not least . . . Lily!"

As the men in the crowd yelled their appreciation, Dan stiffened beside me. The tall, thin blonde, wearing a slinky hot pink cocktail dress and a short, edgy hairstyle, joined the others on the stage, and Dan muttered something I didn't catch.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," Dan said in a clipped tone.

Yeah, right. But I didn't call him on it, because I wanted to hear the rest of what Alejandro had to say.

"Giving blood can be painless, even pleasurable," the vamp said with a knowing smile. "Who would like to try it with one of my lovely assistants?"

On cue, the assistants all smiled, baring fangs.

A feeling like desire surged out of him over the audience. The sudden surge in lust, thrill, and anticipation throughout the hall made Lola perk up and pay attention. Uh-oh. A hot-cold sensation washed through me, leaving me tingling and hyperaware of Dan and all the vamps in the place.

I had a mental flash of Lola's bottle rocking and the cork threatening to pop off. I couldn't let her loose now when things were so unstable. Would she go berserker with so many targets around? I stomped her down, quick, but could still feel her awareness simmering just underneath my skin.

Dan looked at me oddly. "You okay?"

"Fine," I muttered. Just peachy.

The vamp I'd bumped into earlier shot me a snarky look, apparently annoyed that we were interrupting the show. He did a double-take and said accusingly, "Wait. I *do* know you. You're the Slayer."

What? How did he know that?

Behind me, someone said, "The Slayer? Are you sure?"

Bewildered, I turned toward the second voice, and the male vamp's eyes narrowed. "It *is* her. Hey," he yelled up to the stage, his voice carrying clearly in the expectant silence of the hall, "I thought you guaranteed safe passage for everyone attending tonight."

As Alejandro waited for volunteers to make their way on to the stage, he smiled at the heckler. "Yes, I did."

"Then what is the Slayer doing here? She slaughters vampires for fun."

Appalled, I could do nothing but gape. I'd better defuse this quick, or they'd go all Vin Diesel on my ass.

Angry mutterings arose from the vamps in the crowd, and the hair on my arms rose, prickling with the awareness of rising danger.

"I'm not here for that," I protested to Alejandro. I smoothed the hair on my arms, trying to calm them, calm Lola.

"You see," Alejandro said with an engaging smile. "She isn't here to hurt anyone."

"Yeah, right," someone yelled.

"She's killed a lot of us," came another shouted accusation.

How many innocents have *you* killed? I wanted to ask, but this was so not the time for it.

The tension rose even more palpably in the room, making my skin crawl and testing my control of Lola. The vampires milled around, muttering to each other, glaring at the stage and me. They were obviously working themselves up to something. If someone didn't do something real quick, people might get hurt.

Alejandro must have noticed it, too, for I could feel him sending out calming waves to the humans in the audience, urging them to leave, quietly, safely. They streamed out, hurrying, but not dangerously so. All but Dan, whose block was solid.

The vampire security guards appeared on stage, leveling crossbows at the vamps in the crowd. *Time to leave.* Unfortunately, our way was blocked by the vamps who were closing in behind us, muttering. They were still kept at bay by the threat of the crossbows, but were beginning to gain confidence the more they surrounded us.

I couldn't take them all on—demon or no demon. There must be at least twenty-five or thirty. The only safe way out was through the back of the hall.

Dan muttered in my ear, "Go out through the stage."

My thoughts exactly. I vaulted up onto the stage, followed closely by Dan. Alejandro's lieutenants moved to shield him, but I held my hands up to show I was innocent of any intention to harm him. They let me pass and I backed slowly toward the rear of the stage.

I'd never seen so many vamps in one place. Pulling out a stake would be a bad idea. They'd probably take it as an invitation to rush me.

But, Dan wasn't backing up with me. In fact, the cop was headed toward Alejandro and his lieutenants. "Dan," I called.

He ignored me as he made a beeline for the tall blonde. What was wrong with him?

The mutterings grew louder as the vamps clustered around the stage and the last of the humans hurried out the exits. Soon, the vamps were shouting toward the stage and each other.

"You brought her here on purpose—to identify us."

"Naw, he's using her as a threat to force us to join his pathetic Movement."

"Yeah, they're working together."

"No, no," Alejandro said. "The only way you'll get hurt is if you initiate violence." But his charisma didn't seem to work as well on the vamps as it did on the humans.

If only I could grab Dan and get him out of here. But he was whispering urgently to the blonde who was trying to shake him off.

Alejandro made an imperious gesture and the undead security guards lined up at the edge of the stage, menacing the angry vampires below. Vampires fighting vampires? Heck, they'd do my job for me.

But Alejandro *had* made a point of ensuring all the humans were safe. I hated to admit it, but his heart seemed to be in the right place . . . even if it wasn't beating. Could it be he was really trying to improve relations between vamps and humans like he claimed? Maybe this group wasn't responsible for the increased attacks.

The vampires below were working themselves into a frenzy. I sighed. My appearance had started this, though they seemed to be blaming Alejandro. Maybe if I removed myself—and him—the incipient riot would fizzle out. Besides, he was our best bet for learning what was going on with this group.

I made sure his personal guard saw my hands were miles away from any weapon as I moved closer to Alejandro and muttered, "Shouldn't we get out of here. Like now?" Before Lola broke free and I did something everyone would regret.

He frowned. "My car won't be here for another hour."

"We can't wait that long. Come on, we'll get you out of here."

Austin grinned at him and said, "Go. We can take care of these varmints without you." The others nodded agreement and formed a line behind the guards, still shielding Alejandro.

I pulled Alejandro toward the rear of the stage, yelling, "Dan, come on!"

Dan hesitated, then grabbed the arm of the tall blonde and said something to her that I couldn't hear.

"Tell her to come, too," I urged Alejandro. Anything to get Dan out of there.

The vamp leader gestured, and the woman followed.

Finally. With relief, I hurried Dan and the two vampires out the back, and heard a roar of anger as the vamps realized their quarry was leaving. Sounds of fighting soon followed. How long could Alejandro's people hold them off?

We raced toward the truck and Fang heard us coming. He bristled with his teeth bared. "It's all right," I called to him. "Friends."

I jerked open the door and dove into the cramped back seat beside him. "Don't touch the metal," I warned the vamps. "Silver." They piled a little more cautiously into the front and, wasting no time, Dan started the truck and peeled out of there just as the vamps came boiling out of the hall.

"Go," Alejandro shouted, his head hanging out the passenger side window to check on our pursuers.

Dan went. The howling undead chased us on foot, apparently thinking they could outrun the truck. They were fast, but not that fast. But when Dan slowed down to turn a corner, one actually caught hold of the door frame at the open driver's window. His hand sizzled at contact with the silver, but he wouldn't let go.

DINNER!

Fang darted forward and chomped down on his fingers as Dan elbowed the undead creep in the face. The vamp screeched and let go, and none of his friends were fast enough to catch us. Soon, we left the other vamps in our dust. With the threat gone, Lola subsided and I could relax.

Good job, I thought at Fang.

He gave me a doggie grin. GOTTA GET MY KICKS WHERE I CAN, SINCE YOU SAID THESE OTHER TWO ARE OFF LIMITS. WHAT'S UP WITH THAT?

I filled him in as Dan concentrated on his driving. "Where to?" he asked.

Alejandro hesitated, evidently unwilling to let us know the location of his lair. "Anywhere—it doesn't matter. Away from downtown."

Finally, the woman spoke. "The blood bank on the south side. It's closed tonight because of the rally."

Alejandro nodded. "Good idea." He gave Dan directions then flipped open his cell phone and gave instructions to his driver to meet him there.

A vampire using a cell phone . . . That just seemed wrong, somehow.

He made another call, this time to Austin, asking how things were going at the hall. Alejandro hung up and said, "Now that we're gone, things have calmed down there. No one was hurt . . . much."

Meaning the vamps could heal whatever damage they'd taken.

I nodded, but Dan said nothing, and the woman between Dan and Alejandro was stiff as a board. The tension between them was almost tangible. Weird. What was going on? Alejandro slanted a questioning glance toward me in the back seat. I shrugged, not knowing any more than he did.

Apparently, the vamp didn't believe me, because I soon felt a tickling in my mind. Fang growled, sensing the vamp's attempt by my reaction. "That won't work," I said flatly, soothing the dog's fur.

The tickling vanished. "What won't work?" Alejandro asked.

"You, trying to control my mind. It won't work."

"Why not?" Alejandro laid his arm on the back of the seat and smiled at me, oozing charm and sex appeal with seeming effortlessness. He didn't even need mind control to do it—it came naturally for him.

I bet a lot of women fell for that Latin charm, but I couldn't forget he was one of the undead. Nor, apparently, could the succubus inside me. Lola wasn't even tempted. I just gave him a you-gotta-be-kidding-me look.

He laughed, his voice caressing and full of sexual promises. "I see. I cannot control your mind because you are . . . special."

"Damn straight."

Still grinning, the vamp leader said, "I would expect nothing less of the Slayer."

I scowled at him. "How did you and everyone else learn about me, anyway? And who is calling me the Slayer?"

Alejandro managed to make a shrug look elegant. "A young girl has been showing your picture around, calling you the Slayer, trying to find you."

Oh, crap—not Jen, surely. "Was she about sixteen? Blond? Look like a cheerleader?"

Seeming amused, Alejandro nodded.

It had to be Jennifer. Who else was that moronic?

That got Dan's attention. He shot a glance at Alejandro. "Did she say why she was looking for Val?"

Naw, she probably just had a death wish.

Alejandro's eyes twinkled. "Shall we exchange information, then?"

"Okay," Dan said. "Tit for tat." He pulled up in front of the blood bank, which looked like a renovated hotel, and Alejandro invited us in.

Are you coming? I asked Fang.

He sniffed disdainfully. IF YOU'RE JUST GONNA TALK, YOU DON'T NEED ME. I'LL STAY HERE. YELL IF YOU'RE ACTUALLY GONNA, YOU KNOW, KILL SOMETHING.

He sounded miffed that I wasn't automatically going into slayer mode, but I was curious about this supposed kinder, gentler vein of vampires—not to mention Dan's odd fascination with the woman beside him and what the heck Jen was doing hanging around a bunch of vamps.

Alejandro and the woman led the way inside a darkened lobby, and Dan and I followed. "What's up with you?" I whispered, but Dan ignored me. If he hadn't had such a set expression on his face, I might have thought he was enthralled. But, nope, he was just being Dan—stubborn as all get out.

Alejandro took us up the elevator to the fourth floor and showed us to a state-of-the-art conference room with all kinds of electronic gadgets. I couldn't begin to guess what most of them were for.

"So," the charismatic man said, smiling at me, "I am Alejandro. I cannot continue calling such a lovely young woman the Slayer. You are . . . ?"

Lovely. Uh-huh. "No one. Just call me Buffy," I said. It was a stupid name, but convenient.

He grimaced. "And your charming friend?"

"Dan Sullivan," the woman answered, her face expressionless. "He's a cop."

So they did know each other. But Dan wasn't happy about it, if his expression was any indication.

"And this is Lily Armstrong," Dan said, his voice tight.

"How do you know her?" I asked.

"Former fiancée," he said curtly.

I couldn't tell whether Lily's new dental work was a surprise to Dan or an old wound. I felt for him, I really did, but I hoped it wouldn't distract him from what was going on.

Alejandro raised one elegant eyebrow as if inviting them to explain more, but neither seemed inclined to fill us in. Dan remained standing next to me, glaring at Lily. The woman didn't respond, doing her best to ignore him as she stood by Alejandro's side like a good little flunky.

She ignored me, too, like I wasn't even good enough to notice—no threat in any department. How annoying.

Alejandro shrugged and quirked an eyebrow at Dan. "So. An answer for an answer?" At Dan's nod, the vampire leader asked, "What did you hope to gain by causing a riot at my rally?"

Dan scowled. "It wasn't intentional. We just wanted to learn more about your group."

"Yeah," I added. "I had no idea anyone would know who I was."

"Why did you wish to know more of us?"

"No, you first," I said. "What did the young girl with my picture want?"

Alejandro shrugged. "She wanted to learn more about our organization, find you, and apparently threaten us with your reputation. Her name I do not know."

Good. My jaw tightened anyway. Obviously, Mom hadn't given Jen my new number. But if my sister continued on this stupid course, she might find more than she bargained for.

"And your reason for being at the rally?" Alejandro probed.

Dan paused, then said, "The San Antonio Police Department heard about your group and wanted us to find out more, see if you're dangerous."

"And are we?"

Alejandro talked a good game, but was he telling the truth? I didn't know.

"You tell me," Dan said.

"I assure you I am sincere," Alejandro said with a hand to his heart. In that cape, the gesture made him look like something out of *The Three Musketeers*, and I wondered just how old he was.

Dan snorted. "Then why are there so many vampire kills in the city?"

"That is something I am trying to stop," Alejandro said with a frown.

"How? By bringing them into the fold?"

The vamp inclined his head. "Just so. If I can convince them to join the New Blood Movement, use our blood banks, they will have no reason to feed on humans without their consent."

Dan let out a short bark of laughter. "No reason except for being evil."

"Ah, but that is a common misunderstanding," Alejandro exclaimed. "Becoming a vampire does not make one evil."

"Then what does?"

"You do not understand. One of the side effects of becoming a vampire is that a person becomes much more of what they already were."

I didn't get it.

Apparently, Dan didn't either. "Explain."

"Their . . . primary characteristics are enhanced. For example, if someone is bad to begin with, they will become even more evil after the change. However, if someone lives by honor and justice, such as my *vaquero*, Austin, he will now espouse those attributes even more."

It made a kind of weird sense, but I wasn't sure I bought it. "And you?" I asked. "Don't tell me—you were a Don Juan wannabe."

Alejandro surprised me by laughing. "No, I was a leader of men . . . and women. A good one."

A Spanish aristocrat, I bet. Home-schooled or not, I knew there weren't a lot of good, noble aristocrats who cared more for their fellow man than power and wealth.

Dan's gaze shifted to Lily, as if wondering what characteristics of hers had been enhanced. Annoyed, I wondered what Dan had seen in the Ice Queen.

Who was I kidding? What guy wouldn't be attracted to someone who was tall, blond, and sophisticated? A real woman, not a scruffy kid like me. I asked the question for him. "What about Lily?"

"She has amazing managerial abilities, and a knowledge of modern technology that has become invaluable to the organization."

"Why?" Dan asked, the sound almost exploding from him.

Okay, surprise then. He hadn't known.

That was all he said, but it was enough. The agonized confusion in his tone asked the rest for him. Why had she abandoned her future for a life as one of the undead?

Lily shook her head, not meeting his eyes. "My reasons are my own."

Dan's eyes narrowed. "Who did this to you?" His gaze flicked to Alejandro. "Him?"

Lily shrugged. "No, and it doesn't matter who did. It was my choice. My . . . necessity."

"Necessity?" Dan repeated, grabbing on to the word as if it were a clue. "What does that mean?"

"Mr. Sullivan, please," Alejandro interjected. "It is considered bad manners amongst my people to ask why and how they made the change." He paused. "But perhaps it will comfort you to know that many choose this life for . . . medical reasons. The healing powers of the *vampiro* are quite remarkable, healing any disease or wound short of death."

Dan faced Lily. "Were you ill?" Like me, Dan had evidently noticed that Alejandro hadn't actually claimed Lily was ill—he had just pointed out the possibility.

Lily turned her head, refusing to answer, refusing to let any expression show on her face. Dan's fists clenched and I felt a twinge of sympathy, though I wondered why he cared so much. She was his ex, wasn't she? Or maybe he hadn't quite gotten over her.

"So," Alejandro said into the silence, making the single word into a full sentence. "Now that you know what we are and what we plan, will your police department believe we mean no harm?"

"I'm not sure I do know or believe that," Dan said.

Alejandro gave him a reproachful look. "If you doubt it, you are welcome to come back here tomorrow night, visit our operation, and see that all is as we say it is."

Okay, I had to admit it looked like he was one of the good guys. But I'd never met a vampire with a white hat before—could we trust him?

Of course, this was Dan's call. Senior officer and all that. I'd feel a lot better if we could talk this over. I wasn't sure his head was in the game since his gaze kept straying to Lily.

In his favor, Alejandro *had* protected the humans at the rally by sending them away, and had even seemed concerned about the fate of those left behind. Could there really be such a thing as a *good* vampire?

Well, if there was, it sure played hell with my world view. But I couldn't condemn him for trying to make things better. Dan evidently came to the same conclusion.

"All right," he said. "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But if you make any mistake, if any one in your organization hurts any human, your ass is ash. Got it?"

He smiled. "Yes I have it."

"Good. Val, let's go." He hesitated for a moment, still glaring at Lily as if he would force her to give up her secrets.

"Dan," I said a little louder, "we have no more business here."

Dan grimaced, but followed me out the door. Once in the truck, he clenched the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles turned white, his expression full of frustration.

Fang and I shared a glance.

WHAT'S HIS PROBLEM?

Later. "Are you all right?" I asked Dan.

"Fine," he bit out.

Uh-huh. "I—I'm sorry about Lily," I said. Not sorry that Dan was no longer with the hot-shot hottie, but no one should have to learn a loved one—even a former loved one—had become a creature of the night.

He struggled with himself for a moment, but only one word emerged. "Yeah."

Guess he needed more time to take it in. "Hey, if you—"

"Change the subject," he grated, interrupting my offer of a shoulder to cry on.

Okay, sure. "Uh, how 'bout them Spurs?" I ventured.

He just gave me an incredulous stare.

Okay, what did I know about sports, anyway? I searched my mind for a new topic, hoping Dan wouldn't try to operate this vehicle until he calmed down. I had to give him something else to think about besides himself. And, frankly, any talk about our job would lead back to the one topic I was trying to avoid—Lily. I had to get his mind on something else.

Okay, he can think about me. "Maybe you could help me with something."

"Like what?" He definitely sounded interested, hopeful even.

How could I ask for his help in finding the other lust demon without telling him why? I'd just have to lie. "Right before I moved out, my stepfather hinted that I might have . . . other family in the area. On my father's side."

"So you're trying to find them?"

"Yes, but he didn't have a phone number or address or anything. Just a name—Lucas Blackburn."

"I assumed you tried the obvious first—the phone book."

"Yes. But none of the Blackburns listed knew a Lucas."

"He's unlisted, then," Dan mused. "That shouldn't be a problem. If he lives in San Antonio, I'll find him." He wrote down the name in his notebook.

"Thanks," I said, feeling genuinely grateful. Wow, I'd just been trying to distract the guy, but this was a huge bonus.

Try Me

Sudden elation filled me as I realized what this meant. I'd finally find someone who seemed to know a heck of a lot more about my curse than I did. Maybe he could tell me more about how to handle it. And maybe . . . maybe he'd even know how to get rid of it forever.

Try Me

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dan couldn't follow up on Lucas Blackburn for me until we went off duty. As we looked for more vampires, I tried not to wonder if I was doing the right thing in attempting to find others like me.

Instead, I kept my mind firmly on the task at hand as we cruised for hours around the areas Dan had identified as most likely to show activity. While we drove, we speculated on whether the New Blood Movement could possibly be a good thing.

I was beginning to think they might be legit, but though Dan had given them the benefit of the doubt earlier, he was still convinced they were all bad. The Movement really changed the way we looked at things. SCU policy was that we couldn't stake the vamps unless we had proof they were really bad guys. Before tonight, it had been easy. See vamp attack, see vamp die. Now, it wasn't so black and white.

But the vamps were either celebrating the Day of the Dead in their own special ways, or were lying low for some reason 'cause we couldn't find any more. At least the constant vigilance seemed to keep Dan's mind occupied and off of Lily.

Finally, a couple of hours before dawn, it was time to quit. And since most vampires were probably heading toward a dark, safe place about now, we called it a night.

After we checked out, Dan drove me back to the townhouse. "What are you going to do now?" I asked.

"I don't know—have a drink or two, maybe listen to some music. Why?"

I shrugged. I wasn't sure Dan should be alone right now. Drinking alone was never a good sign. "I don't have anything else to do and I'm not sleepy yet. Want to hang out? Gwen won't be home for another couple of hours yet."

YOU JUST WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT LILY.

Okay, I admit it. I'm curious. What's wrong with that?

Fang snorted as Dan shrugged and said, "Whatever."

He followed me into the townhouse and Fang said, WELL, I'M BEAT. YOU TWO CHAT AMONGST YOURSELVES. I'M CATCHING SOME Z'S.

Try Me

I hugged him, then cupped his fuzzy little chin and turned his face up to mine. He might be snarky, but he was still incredibly cute. I kissed him on the top of his head and scratched his ears. *Goodnight, Fang. Sleep tight. Love you.*

He licked my nose. BACK ATCHA, KIDDO. Before things could turn too warm and fuzzy, he turned and trotted toward the bed. DON'T THINK TOO LOUD, OKAY?

How did you regulate the volume of a thought? Bemused, I promised to try and asked Dan, "Would you like something to drink?" I peered into the refrigerator. "Looks like we have Coke, orange juice, beer, water . . ."

"Thanks, but I know where Gwen stashes the booze." He opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of bourbon. "Want some?" He hesitated. "Oh, sorry. Forgot you're not old enough."

Just another reason for him to think I was a kid. Hell, he wasn't much older. Annoyed, I said, "No thanks—it tastes like gasoline." I poured myself a Coke.

He put some soft jazz on the CD player, turned the lights down low, and settled down on the opposite end of the couch from me with his feet up on the table.

"Gee, make yourself at home."

He looked somewhat embarrassed, "Sorry, I hang out at Gwen's a lot and this is how I unwind."

"It's okay," I reassured him.

He didn't seem to be able to relax, though, and looked as if some kind of hamster was spinning madly in his head. "Want to talk about it?" I asked.

"Nothing to talk about."

"Uh huh," I said doubtfully. "You learn your ex is a vampire and there's nothing to talk about?"

He sighed. "Well, one thing's for sure. There's no chance of getting back together."

Had he been hoping there was? I wondered at his disgusted tone. "You can't deal with dating a vampire?" I asked.

"It's hard to date someone who considers you food." He glanced at me. "Could you do it?"

"I guess not." Though it made me wonder what he'd think of dating a part-demon girl. Not that I was interested. Just, you know, curious.

A mental snort from Fang in the other room showed me what he thought of that rationalization. *Go back to sleep*, I thought irritably.

I didn't know you could laugh in someone else's mind, but Fang managed it.

Dan took another sip. "What I don't get is why. I mean, taking a step like that—turning into a vampire—has to be voluntary, right?"

"So far as I know. Unless the person who turned her somehow forced her to drink his or her blood. It's possible." Possible, but not probable. If that had been the case, she wouldn't be so cozy with them now.

Apparently, Dan had come to the same conclusion. "Why would she do such a thing? You think she was sick?"

I shrugged. "You'd know better than I would." I dearly wanted to know more, but he didn't seem very forthcoming and I didn't want him to think I was interested in him or anything.

EVEN IF YOU ARE?

Go to sleep, Fang. Sheesh—I couldn't even be private in my own head.

OKAY, OKAY. DON'T GET YOUR KNICKERS IN A TWIST. I'LL BE SILENT AS THE GRAVE.

Ignoring the hellhound, I said, "Maybe she wanted immortality. That's important to some people."

"No, I can't see it. But Alejandro could have enthralled her, forced her to want it."

I made a noncommittal noise. Again, it was possible. Maybe even probable, but more likely wishful thinking. Evidently, Dan wasn't over Lily yet. And who could compete with that?

He turned to look at me. "Hey, Alejandro said your sister came looking for you. What's that about?"

"I don't know." I took another sip. "The reason my parents threw me out is because they thought I was a bad influence on her—she was all gung-ho on helping me kill vampires. But she's too young for this. Doesn't have the same . . . reflexes I do."

Dan stared at me curiously. "Yeah, how *do* you do it? It doesn't seem quite natural."

"Well, it is," I said defensively. Natural for me, anyway. To get him off the subject, I said, "Guess I need to find her tomorrow and beat some sense into her head."

He nodded. "I know how it is to have a stubborn little sister. Need some help?"

I grinned, remembering Jen's reaction the last time they'd met. "Yeah, sure. You, she might listen to."

He rose and placed his empty glass in the sink. "Okay, it's a deal. I'll come by early tomorrow and we'll put a scare into your sister."

"Good." I rose and followed him to the door. Trying for a joke, I said, "If the vamps don't kill me, Mom sure will." I didn't pull it off very well.

He glanced down at me. "Hey," he said softly. "You really are worried, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "Mom forbade me to see Jen again, but how can I protect her if she runs into danger on her own?"

"Don't worry—we'll take care of it."

He reached out to give me a hug and for some stupid reason, I dropped my guard for a moment and let him. It had been so long since someone had reached for me without holding thoughts of the demon in the back of their mind, without any thought but that I needed a hug. Human contact is a wondrous and scary thing. For me more than most.

Our energy fields intersected and clung. Heat flared between us—an odd, dancing energy—and my heart beat faster. Lola reached out to him and a surge of want and need flowed back and forth between us like a live thing.

I clutched his shoulders hard, tightening the embrace. The warmth of his body against mine, his woodsy, masculine scent, and the strange tingling in my own body were totally wonderful, yet frightening at the same time. Fearing he'd think I was acting too needy, I pulled back. Not all the way out of his arms, just far enough to look into his eyes.

Dan gave me an intense look, like he'd suddenly realized I wasn't just a girl, but a woman . . . and he wondered what that woman tasted like.

A strange heat flooded through me, leaving me feeling boneless and yearning. *Yes, please yes. Kiss me*, I willed him.

He lowered his head, staring at my mouth. Ohmigod. I didn't know it could, but my heart beat even faster and I felt energized—all warm and tingly—just like with Johnny Morton two years ago.

Uh oh. Draining your partner's life force was so not cool. I gasped and pulled away.

He looked stunned and I didn't quite know what to say or do. He didn't think of me as a kid anymore, that was for sure, but it was artificial, brought on by the demon within me.

"God, I'm so sorry," he said. "I don't—"

I cut him off as I struggled desperately to shove a disappointed Lola back into her bottle. "Don't worry about it. It was my fault."

"But—"

We heard a key in the lock then—Gwen must be home. Dan ran a hand through his hair, looking a little frazzled, and opened the door for his sister. "Hey, Gwennie. Val and I were just having a little chat, but I'm headed home now. See you." He rushed out the door.

Gwen glanced at her brother's back, then at me. She closed the door softly, asking, "What was that all about? Is there something going on between you two?"

"No, no," I assured her, not sure how she'd feel if there was. "It's just that he ran into his ex today, and he's not happy with . . . her new lifestyle."

"Oh," Gwen said in a flat tone and dumped her stuff on the dining room table. "You mean Lily?"

"Yeah." And this was the perfect opportunity to learn more about the woman Dan had loved at one time.

"How long have they been broken up?"

She grimaced. "Two months, thank God." Flopping down on the couch, she said, "I don't know what he saw in her—she's such a cold fish."

That was nice to hear. I sat down across from Gwen. "She seemed very . . . confident."

"Yeah. He's always been drawn to strong women, but we can't figure out why he chose *her*. The family's just glad she ended it."

If she ended it, that might explain why Dan still wasn't over her. "Family?" I asked.

"Yeah—my mother and my two brothers."

"I didn't know you had other brothers." Dan hadn't mentioned it. Then again, we hadn't talked about much except stalking the undead and my family.

"Yeah—Jack and Adam."

Two others like Dan? Whoa. "Older or younger?"

"Older. Dan and I are the youngest."

"Do they live here in San Antonio, too?"

"Yes—Jack is a cop and Adam's in civil service at Randolph Air Force Base and in the reserves."

I raised an eyebrow. "All serving their country in one way or another?"

She laughed. "Yeah, it's a Sullivan thing. It's sort of a tradition, a motto, amongst us that every family member serves and protects. My grandfather and father were both in the military—Dad died in Vietnam. The same with my cousins—police, military, firemen. It's what we do."

"I get it—you're all heroes," I said with a half smile. It explained a lot about Dan, why he was in the SCU to begin with.

She looked surprised. "No, that wasn't what I meant at all."

"I didn't mean it in a bad way," I assured her. "I think it's cool."

Gwen looked thoughtful. "That's interesting—I never thought of it that way. But you see why Lily wouldn't have fit in?"

"Yeah, she's more the predator type than the hero type."

"Exactly." Gwen wrinkled her brow. "You said something earlier about her new lifestyle. What did you mean by that?"

Uh, how did I explain this without mentioning the fact that she had gone over to the dark side—literally?

When I hesitated, Gwen's eyes widened. "Don't tell me—she's turned into a vampire."

Whoa. "You know about them?" I knew she'd seen fang marks on victims in the ER, but didn't realize she knew what made them.

"Oh, yeah. Dan explained all about them. He wants me to be more careful. But I'm the only other one in the family who knows. Since you're his partner, I figure you had to."

"Yeah." It was odd talking about these things with someone outside my family. I'd had to remain close-mouthed for so long

"So is she one of the walking undead now?" Gwen persisted.

I nodded.

"Figures. Undead totally fits her personality. Well, good. Now maybe Dan will give up on the skank."

"He really loves her, huh?"

Gwen shrugged. "I don't think so. I think it was more of a pride thing—she ended it instead of him, but wouldn't give him a reason. I think he just really wants to know why. Plus he'd be upset if *anyone* he knew started playing on the wrong team."

Seemed like more than that to me. But what did I know? I wasn't bright enough to figure that out tonight. Not as frustrated as I felt. I was getting really tired of wanting things I couldn't have. Family, a boyfriend, a life.

Except . . . when I looked back on the last week, I realized I had more of a life now than I'd ever had before. Just because certain aspects sucked didn't mean it wasn't a life.

She yawned. "Well, I'm gonna hit the sack."

"Me, too." Though, as I crawled into bed with Fang, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to sleep. Remembering what had almost happened earlier with Dan was liable to occupy my dreams tonight, whether I wanted it to or not.

Inwardly, I felt like hugging the memory tight and living it over and over again.

Outwardly, I squirmed. Crap—I'd almost drained him, just like Johnny. How could I face Dan later today? How could I continue working in close proximity to him, wondering if the demon would break loose again, would try to enthrall him?

Unfortunately, I had no choice. I'd just have to keep a lid on it and make sure our energy fields never mingled again.

GOOD LUCK WITH THAT.

I glared at Fang on the bed. Man's best friend? Ha.

Later that day, as I waited for Dan to show up, I wondered if I should just take off on my own and blow him off. I was tempted, but I'd still have to see him at work anyway. Better just to tough it out, pretend it never happened. I shook my head. Well, nothing *bad* happened except for a simple hug that had led nowhere. Unfortunately.

No—don't even think that.

It couldn't happen again, no matter how much I wished it would.

BOY, YOU'VE GOT IT BAD.

"Shut up," I muttered at Fang. "You're not helping."

He jumped up on the couch next to me and nudged my hand with his nose, offering comfort and probably an apology. IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT—IT'S THE SUCCUBUS PART OF YOU.

I scratched his fuzzy little ears. "I know. I just need to learn to control it."

YOU WILL.

Funny—the hellhound had more faith in me than I did.

When Dan finally knocked on my door about two in the afternoon, he looked none the worse for wear. Good—I was afraid he might have pulled a bender or something. But he looked as if he had everything under control, though his expression was a bit wary as he regarded me. After the way I'd acted like a frightened rabbit last night, I didn't blame him. Half the time I wasn't sure if I was a kid or an adult. Couldn't blame him for being confused, too.

I felt suddenly geeky and awkward, not knowing where to look or put my hands.

"You ready to find Jen and beat some answers out of her?" Dan asked.

He knew exactly what to say to make me feel at ease again—ignore the awkwardness, concentrate on pounding something. Now *that* I was good at. I laughed. "Sure."

Not knowing how long we'd be gone or if we'd be back before dark, I put on my holster with the stakes in back over my T-shirt and jeans, and covered them with my vest. "Okay, I'm ready."

I got into Dan's SUV and scooted as far away from him as I could get.

GEE, THAT'S NOT OBVIOUS OR ANYTHING. Fang jumped between us, making the distance seem more natural.

I resisted the urge to stick my tongue out at the dog. Sure, Fang was a great friend, but there were disadvantages to having an intelligent furry companion who knew you too well . . . and could make snide comments in your head.

"So, where can we find your sister?" Dan asked.

"She should still be in school this time of day." I gave him directions to the high school.

Luckily, I'd picked Jen up several times so the school officials knew me. But that familiarity did me no good.

She was at home, sick.

I had Dan call my parent's house but there was no answer. We tried the store next, but when Dan asked for Jen, pretending to be one of her friends, Rick said Jen was at school.

Dan turned off his cell phone. "Sounds like your little sister is playing hooky. Think she's out looking for you again?"

"Probably."

"So where would she be?"

I thought for a moment. "Maybe she's ditching at home, since Mom and Rick are at the store."

"Okay, let's try it."

It was tough driving up to the only home I'd known all my life and feeling like an outsider. I hated the thought of going in where I was no longer wanted, but I had to find Jen before she did something stupid.

"Is that her?" Dan asked.

Jen was just leaving the house, locking the door and looking around furtively. When I waved, she ran up to the car and beamed at me. "I've been trying to find you, but no one will tell me where you live or give me your phone number."

"Mom and Rick wouldn't give it to you because they don't want you seeing me anymore. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, but the 'rents have no idea how important this is." She glanced at the car. "Hey, can you give me a ride to the bookstore? I'm supposed to work there this afternoon."

Dan nodded, so I got out and motioned her to sit between us and Fang jumped in the back seat. As she got in, I gave Dan directions and he headed toward the bookstore.

Fang's nostrils flared. SHE SMELLS LIKE VAMPIRE.

My little sister's one of the undead? My heart stopped for a moment, until I realized Fang meant she smelled like vampire because she'd been hanging around them. Relief filled me, but annoyance soon followed. "What the hell have you been doing?" I snapped.

"Yeah," Dan all but growled. "Tell us why you've been flashing your sister's picture all over town, calling her the Slayer, nearly getting her killed."

"Killed?" Jen repeated. "I-I didn't know."

It was her favorite refrain, unfortunately used way too often, right after she screwed up. Truth be told, that's the part of Jen's life that made me angry. I was never allowed to say, "I don't know." Never allowed to be a kid. I tamped down the jealousy, telling myself for the zillionth time that it wasn't Jen's fault she could have a normal life, be a normal kid.

She glanced back and forth between Dan and me, looking frantic. "I-I thought I'd be safer around the . . . you know . . . if they thought I was under your protection. You have quite a reputation, Val."

"Yeah," Dan replied. "One you made for her. Until you put a name and face on her, the 'you know' didn't know who she was."

Jen looked miserable. "I'm sorry. I joined their movement to find out more about them for Val. I was just trying to help."

Dan had come to a stop a block past the bookstore and I spoke fast, not wanting Mom or Rick to see Jen with me. "You did *what*? How could you be so stupid? And why would you think that putting yourself in danger could possibly help me?"

She hunched one shoulder. "I'm not in danger. And I'm learning a lot—"

"I don't need your help—and they are *not* safe." Even if Alejandro meant what he said, I still didn't want my little sister hanging around them. "You have to promise me you won't talk to the vamps again—don't even go near them." She could be enthralled so easily.

She looked sullen. "All right, but what if I need to get in contact with you?"

"Call." I gave her my new phone number along with Dan's cell phone number, and Jen put them carefully in her purse.

Suddenly, Dan said, "Ah, hell."

What—?

But I didn't need to ask as my door was suddenly jerked open. I lurched a little, since I'd been leaning on it, but the seatbelt kept me in place. What the—

It was Mom, looking like a thundercloud about to dump a gutload of bad weather. Rick was right behind her.

"What are you doing here?" her mother demanded. "I told you to stay away from Jen."

"It's my fault," Jen said. "I asked her to—"

"I don't care what you asked her. I gave an order, and I expect it to be obeyed—by both of you. Get out of that car, young lady."

An order? Geez, what did she think this was? The army? Calmly, I unbuckled the seatbelt and motioned for Jen to get out. "Go on."

Jen looked pleadingly at me. "Can't I live with you?"

"No."

"You are *not* going to live with *her*," Mom all but shouted. "Get out."

Fang growled at Mom as Jen slowly got out of the car. WHOA. WHAT A BITCH. AND I AIN'T TALKING ABOUT NO FEMALE DOG

Dan, looking pissed, got out of the car and glared at Mom and Rick over the hood. "Lay off. The truth is, your daughter Jennifer is skipping school, playing cozy with the vampires, and endangering Val to play some game of her own. She made her own stupid mistakes."

Well, they deserved to know the truth, but I wouldn't have put it so bluntly. I had to admit that Dan's version saved time, though. I slid back into the car and closed the door, hoping for a quick getaway. Dan got back in the car, too, having made his point.

Mom looked taken aback, but recovered quickly. "I should have known. It's all Val's fault—if she hadn't been hunting vampires, Jen wouldn't know about them to begin with."

Mom's face crumpled in distress, but I couldn't feel sorry for her, not with her blaming her demon daughter for every problem in the family.

I rolled my eyes. "Get a clue, Sharon. You run a freakin' new age bookstore fergawdsake."

Rick, looking stone-faced, butted in to ask Jen, "Where have you been going? Who have you been seeing?"

Like he could do anything about it. I grimaced. "Never mind. I'll take care of it." Then to my little sister, I said, "Don't tell him. He'll just do something stupid and get himself killed."

"I don't care," Rick said. "She's my daughter and it's my responsibility to—"

Dan butted in. "It's your responsibility to stay alive to take care of her," he said. "The rest is for us to do. I'm with the Special Crimes Unit of the San Antonio Police Department, and Val is now my partner. This is our job. This is what we're trained for. Let us handle it."

Mom did nothing but cry as Rick stood there, his fists clenched. "You can't expect me to stand by and do nothing when my daughter is out there in danger."

Yeah, their true colors were showing now. They didn't give a flick about what happened to me. Only their precious normal daughter. His *real* daughter. But I had no tears now, just anger.

I couldn't trust myself to speak, though. Luckily, Dan did it for me. "If you try something on your own, if you're stupid enough to jeopardize this investigation, we'll have you arrested for obstruction of justice and thrown in jail. Have you got that?"

Fang yipped. GO, DAN!

Rick and Mom stared at us both, stunned.

Yeah, they got it all right. I just hoped it stuck. "Let's get out of here," I muttered to Dan.

"Gladly." He started the car and peeled out, leaving them all gaping after us.

"Thanks," I said softly.

"No problem. That'll teach them to mess with the Slayer."

Fang chuckled, but I didn't think it was so funny. As my gut twisted in a knot, I wondered if I'd destroyed all chance of ever having a normal relationship with my family again.

It didn't matter. They might not care about me anymore, but I still cared about them. Only one thing was paramount now—finding out exactly which blood bank Jennifer had been going to and making sure she never went there again.

Try Me

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was almost time to go to work. Ramirez texted us on Dan's phone and asked us to check in. Though we could pretty much set our own hours so long as we produced results, we still tried to stay with night shift hours as much as possible. And, of course, give Ramirez a progress report every once in awhile.

Dan drove to the SCU headquarters and we found Ramirez in his office. The lieutenant waved us to the rickety seats and said, "So tell me what the hell happened last night. I hear you found the vein of vampires and caused a riot."

Dan and I exchanged a look of surprise, but then I realized some of the other scuzzies must have been at the rally last night. "We didn't cause a riot," I protested.

Ramirez let out a bark of laughter, but didn't sound amused in the least. "What do *you* call it, when twenty or thirty vampires have a rumble and trash a public place?"

"Fangbangers just wan-na have fun?" I asked.

Fang nudged my leg. OOH, GOOD ONE.

But Ramirez wasn't amused. "Don't be cute," he snapped. "Luckily, the vampires themselves must be helping the reporters forget, or there would be widespread panic by now." He scowled at me. "I hear you've been touting yourself as a badass vampire slayer, and that's what set them off. What the hell were you thinking?"

I squirmed a little. "That wasn't my doing. It was my sister's."

"Your *sister*? What the hell does she have to do with it?"

"You see, Jennifer has this dumb idea that she can help me, so she joined the Movement to find out as much as she can, but she used my reputation to keep herself safe while she's doing it." I paused, adding, "She's only sixteen."

Ramirez buried his face in his hands for a moment, apparently trying to control himself. Finally, he raised his head and asked, "Your little sister is involved in this investigation?"

"Not really—I told her to lay off. She's probably grounded for the rest of her life by now."

"You really think that will stop her?"

I hoped so.

Ramirez turned to Dan. "And you. I hear one of the vamps was named Lily. I only know one Lily, and she disappeared on you."

Dan's face tightened. "Yes, I found her, but that was uncalled for."

Ramirez shook his head, looking weary. "You're right. I'm sorry. Sorry you found her, sorry that she was turned, and even sorrier that I'm going to have to pull you both from the investigation."

"What?" Dan and I exclaimed in unison.

"What did you think was gonna happen when you got personally involved?"

"We didn't get them involved," I protested. "They did that on their own. We had nothing to do with it."

"It doesn't matter how it happened," Ramirez said. "The fact is, they have now become a part of the investigation."

"You question our objectivity?" Dan's voice was quiet but part of me was tuned into him in a more intimate way since last night. I could feel anger pulsing just below the surface.

"Damned right I'm worried about your objectivity. Your emotions are involved now, and when emotions are involved, reason goes out the window."

"Not mine," Dan said. "Not Val's."

"You mean to tell me that you're not gonna let the fact that your ex is part of the group you're investigating influence you? That putting Val's sister in danger isn't a factor?"

Dan visibly reined in his anger. "Of course it affects us. How could it not? But it just means we'll work harder to make sure this new movement doesn't endanger the city or anyone else's family." When Ramirez didn't look convinced, he added, "We're going to investigate this organization one way or another. We have to. So we might as well help you while we're at it."

Ramirez ran a hand over his face, looking tired. "We're so short-handed, I can't afford to put anyone else on this. But there is one thing I'd really like to know."

"What's that?"

"Is it true you *rescued* the leader of this vampire movement?"

Fang chortled silently. YEAH, THAT WOULD STICK IN MY CRAW, TOO.

It did look kind of bad. I had to explain. "Yeah, and now he owes us a favor. The other vamps blamed Alejandro for me being there, for putting them all in danger. I couldn't leave him to be torn apart, not when it was my fault he was in trouble. Besides, we need him alive to find out what they're up to."

"So you did cause the riot," Ramirez said flatly.

"Not intentionally," Dan protested. "We had no way of knowing her sister had primed that particular pump to explode. Besides, their leader is intrigued with Val. Not only did she save him, but she's immune to his power. Her mental block is solid. That seems to fascinate him and they have already developed a rapport."

Wow—he was sticking up for me. I decided I liked having a partner.

"A rapport? Is that true?" the lieutenant asked me.

"I don't know about that," I protested. "But he was trying awfully hard to convince me his movement is all sweetness and light."

Ramirez sighed. "Okay, tell me about it."

We explained how the New Blood Movement was proposing to have vampires live in harmony with humans, to donate blood so they wouldn't have to hunt and feed.

Ramirez looked incredulous. "And you believe this crap?"

I shrugged. "He said that the people who become vampires aren't really evil—they just become more of what they were when they were human. According to him, bad people become bad vampires. Good people become good vampires."

The lieutenant looked thoughtful. "You buy that?"

"I don't know," I said. I tried to be objective. "It's possible that the independent ones we've run into on the streets are all the bad ones, and the good ones have banded quietly together under Alejandro. After all, he did make a point of saving all the humans before the riot started last night."

"Yet the riot did start," Ramirez pointed out. "In your estimation, is this movement a danger to the city?"

"Not right now," I said. "Alejandro's trying hard to convince us he's harmless, what with these blood banks around the city and the rally and publicity. He's risked a lot to out himself. Why would he endanger that?" When neither man responded, I continued, "So far, he seems to be targeting kids, Goths, misfits. He hasn't gone for the mainstream yet. I think he means what he says." Not that I wanted my sister involved in any of that.

Dan didn't look convinced. "That's how drug dealers start, too. They go for the kids with no support system or people who won't look too closely at the hand offering help or a high."

Ramirez's gaze swiveled to regard Dan. "You have a different opinion?"

"Let's just say I'm not convinced yet. I don't trust Alejandro. He's too smooth, too polished. He may be using this movement as a front for something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, but I plan to find out."

"Okay," Ramirez said, though he didn't look happy about it. "See what you can find out—with a minimum of damage to any innocent bystanders, please—and let me know what you learn. We need to get this locked down and settled."

"You seem remarkably well-informed for someone who doesn't work the streets," Dan said. "Who's your informant? Maybe he can help us."

"Informant? I had another SCU operative at the rally."

Dan nodded as if he'd expected that response, too, but didn't quite believe it. "And for the other info you've gathered?" he asked quietly.

I glanced at Dan in surprise. Good point. Where *did* the lieutenant get the info he'd been feeding us?

Ramirez frowned. "We occasionally get tips—anonymous ones from one particular source. But the information always checks out. Don't worry, I'll let you know everything I learn, too." He paused, then added, "But if it looks like your personal lives are affecting your work, I'm taking you off, you hear?"

"We hear," Dan assured him. Obviously dismissed, he took me by the arm and practically shoved me out of the office.

"Whew," I said, peering around to look at my backside. "My butt has a few teeth marks, but I think it's still there."

Fang laughed and so did Dan. "You think *that* was an ass-chewing? That was mild compared to some of the inquisitions I've sat through. We were lucky." He grabbed the keys to the truck. "Why don't we check out the blood bank?"

"Sure. Sounds like loads of fun."

He smiled then, looking all hot and sexy, and all of a sudden, the memory of last night, the memory I'd been suppressing all day, came back to me in full IMAX 3D.

My body reacted with a surge of need so strong, it left me weak in the knees, with all kinds of strange feelings I really didn't want to have. Not right now. Not with my partner.

Fang shoved my leg. GET A GRIP.

I'm trying to. I plastered myself against the door, as far away as I could get from him, and forcibly controlled Lola's reaction. If it was a choice between repeating last night's near kiss or kicking vampire butt, I'd feel safer in the middle of a fangbanger brawl.

"You okay?" Dan asked curiously.

No. That memory had blindsided me, releasing Lola without even a three-minute warning. But I couldn't tell him that. "Fine. I was just thinking that I, uh, didn't think to bring enough stakes." There was nothing like stabbing a cold, sharp implement into an undead body to keep the lust demon at bay.

"No problem. We have everything we need in the back seat."

I sighed. "Okay, let's go." Just where was a bloodsucking fiend when you needed one?

I put a lid on Lola as Dan drove to the blood bank on the south side. The renovated hotel where it was housed was brightly lit, an inviting oasis in the midst of a bleak neighborhood that appeared furtive and sordid after the sun went down.

I could understand why people in the area would gravitate toward the blood bank, but wondered how many actually stayed once they figured out its purpose.

He parked the truck as close as he could, though it was a couple of blocks away, and loaded himself up with silver jewelry and concealed stakes as I stuck a few in my back waistband. Sure, the Movement preached tolerance and compassion, but you could never be too careful.

"Ready?" he asked.

"I guess. You have a plan?"

"Try to find out as much as we can."

"Sounds good to me."

Fang looked up at us eagerly. YEAH. LET'S GET SOME ANSWERS.

We entered the lobby area and, now that the lights were on, I could see it was as freshly renovated as the outside, kind of like a doctor's office, but done in warm brown and burgundy, with comfy chairs and dark wooden furniture. The waiting area looked about three-quarters full. At one end, a perky cheerleader type about Jen's age was trying to convince a man to accept a cup of juice.

He was about thirty-five—a mechanic if his blue work shirt and oval name tag were any indication—and had a weird satisfied look on his face, with fresh fang marks on his neck and a wet spot on his fly.

En. Gross.

GIVE YA THREE GUESSES AS TO WHAT HE'S BEEN DOING.

I didn't have to guess—I knew.

"Please, Mr. Johnson," the girl said. "You can't leave yet. You need to sit down and have some juice and cookies. The rules say you have to wait for at least half an hour after donating blood."

"So that's what they call it these days," Dan said for my ears only. "I wonder if Vice knows about this place. He looks like he's strung out on something."

Yeah. The seductive lure of the vampire's bite was a drug many would be unable to resist. Was Dan remembering what Charlene had done to him?

When Johnson tried to stagger away, the girl stomped her foot and said petulantly, "If you don't sit down now, you won't be allowed to come back."

That seemed to penetrate his sex-induced haze. "Not shee Lily again?" he slurred, then took the cup and abruptly collapsed into a chair.

Dan muttered something incoherent, and I wondered how he felt now that he'd learned Lily was not only a vampire, but obviously racking up a string of pseudo-boyfriends.

Fang sighed. NOT GOOD, BABE. NOT GOOD.

The cheerleader-type girl hurried back to the reception desk, and we stood in line behind a man who was waiting there. The name plate at the desk read Brittany.

Brittany gave the man in front of us an exasperated look. "Now, Mr. Archuleta, you know it's only been a week since you donated. You have to wait at least a month between donations."

I exchanged a disbelieving glance with Dan. They had standards? Maybe they weren't the pushers we thought after all.

After a few minutes of unsuccessful wheedling, the man left, disappointed.

"Hello," Brittany greeted Dan cheerfully. "Welcome to the blood bank. Which type of donation would you like to make?"

"None," Dan said with obvious revulsion.

Had to agree there. How could anyone watch their lifeblood flow into a plastic bag, knowing it was going to end up as someone's dinner?

I interrupted. "Do you know Jennifer Anderson?" I showed Brittany a picture of my sister.

"No, who's she?" The girl looked genuinely puzzled.

Well, crap. I guess this wasn't the right blood bank.

Dan said, "We'd like to see Alejandro. He said he'd be here tonight."

Good idea—get the info direct from the man in charge.

Her cheerful demeanor didn't waver. "I'm sorry, but Alejandro isn't seeing any more clients this evening."

"We're not clients. We're with the police." Dan flashed his badge. "And he invited us. Dan Sullivan and . . . Buffy."

Huh? Why was he calling me that? Oh yeah, that's the name I'd given Alejandro last night and, without asking why I didn't want my name known, Dan was honoring my decision. Cool.

Fang didn't know to give Dan high marks. He laughed inside my head. BUFFY?

I shrugged, feeling kind of embarrassed. *Hey, I don't give my name to vampires as a general rule, and Buffy was the only thing I could come up with at the time. Cut me some slack.*

Brittany looked uncertain for a moment, then used the fancy telephone system on her desk to hold a low-voiced conversation with someone. She hung up and beamed at us. "Alejandro is expecting you." Handing Dan a key card, she added, "You'll need this for the elevator, fourth floor, the executive suite."

I turned toward the elevator, but Dan paused to lean down and smile at her, asking softly, "Shouldn't you be home studying?"

Brittany's smile faltered. "I'm eighteen—I can do what I want."

She was the same age I was? She seemed years younger.

Fang added, AND WAY STUPIDER.

I had to agree. What a waste.

Dan snorted. "And you choose to spend your free time in the bad part of town, working for bloodsuckers, helping losers get their rocks off? Whatever they're paying you, it isn't enough."

Looking offended, Brittany said, "They don't pay me—I'm a volunteer. It's a good cause. Do you know how many lives we save by manning these blood banks?"

"Do you know how many addicts you're making in the process?" he countered.

Whoa, Dan, tell us what you really think. But I couldn't blame him—I wondered the same things.

"It's not an addiction," Brittany protested. "We take blood *from* these people, we don't put anything into their bloodstream, so how could anyone get addicted?"

Dan leaned in closer. "Think Johnson or Archuleta would say the same?" After his encounter with Charlene, he'd know, if anyone did, what a vamp could make you feel, make you want.

The girl waved that away as inconsequential. "They're just crushing on some of the women who work here. There's no addiction."

Dan leaned farther over the desk to peer at Brittany's neck and twitched her collar aside. "I don't see any fang marks on you. How would you know how it affects people?"

Indignantly, Brittany straightened her collar. "I know because Alejandro told me so. And they won't let the volunteers give blood in that way."

"Oh, yeah? Ever wonder why not?"

The girl sniffed. "You'll have to ask him that."

"Meaning you don't know," he said flatly. "Tell me, what else do the volunteers do?"

Crossing her arms over her chest, Brittany said, "I don't think I should talk to you anymore."

He straightened. "If you're not doing anything wrong, why won't you talk to me?"

"Because you twist what I say," she said petulantly.

Yes, and he did it so well "Never mind," I said. "C'mon, Dan, let's go see Alejandro."

As we got in the elevator, Fang said, CAN I BITE ONE? CAN I, HUH?

Maybe. We'll see how it goes.

We used the special key card to take the elevator up to the fourth floor. When we got off, Alejandro was there, beaming at us. "I am happy to see you accepted my invitation, Miss Shapiro."

Miss Shapiro? Alejandro had managed to learn my name in a very short period of time, despite my attempt to mislead him. I raised my eyebrows but said nothing as he escorted us to the suite.

The living area of the suite looked aggressively modern—all stainless steel, black and white leather, and the occasional bold red accent. But it didn't look really lived in, more like a staged magazine photo.

YEAH. KINDA MAKES ME WANT TO TAKE A LEAK ON HIS NICE WHITE RUG.

I suppressed a smirk. Evidently, this was *not* where Alejandro slept out his days. As we seated ourselves, I wondered idly if the vamp used a bed or a coffin.

"So," Alejandro said, producing his charming smile. "You happened to catch us on one of the nights we are at this particular location."

"Us?" I asked.

"Yes." Alejandro gestured, and two of his assistants—Lily and Luis—drifted in, looking incredibly pink and healthy. Obviously, dining on mechanic tartare agreed with Lily. No doubt Luis had just fed as well.

As Lily and Luis took up stations behind Alejandro, Dan's gaze seemed pulled toward Lily. But she was wouldn't return it.

"Did you come for the tour?" Luis asked. Though his English was perfect, his accent was even heavier than Alejandro's.

"No tour," Dan answered. "Just questions."

Alejandro spread his arms in invitation. "Ask."

Before I could, Dan asked, "Do you have a Jennifer Anderson working for you?"

Alejandro glanced at Lily. "Do we?"

Expressionless, Lily typed something into the PDA she pulled from her purse. "Yes, she's been working as a volunteer at the downtown blood bank for about a week."

"So why are you trolling the high schools for volunteers?" Dan asked.

"We do not do this 'troll,'" Alejandro protested. "They hear about us from their friends. They come to us. They find the idea of vampires exciting."

Maybe, but why weren't there more Goth or Emo volunteers? I would have thought they'd be first in line. Instead, the Movement seemed to go for the preppy type.

"Well, Jennifer is one you need to let go," I said firmly.

"But of course," Alejandro said, "if you wish it. But why?"

Dan gave me a hesitant glance, as if asking how much of my personal life I wanted to reveal. Well, since Alejandro knew my name, he could get the rest of it. Sighing, I said, "Jennifer is my sister. My half sister."

Luis let out a brittle laugh. "And you are trying to save your little sister from the big bad vampires. How sweet."

Dan glared at him. "We're trying to protect you as well. If she hadn't been working for you, your rally wouldn't have turned into a riot."

"I don't understand," Alejandro said in bewilderment.

"She's the one who was showing her picture around and calling her the Slayer."

"I see," the vampire leader said thoughtfully. "Of course, I did not know this."

I nodded. "Now that you do, you'll fire her?"

"It is difficult to fire someone you have not hired, but yes, we will ask her to leave her volunteer position." He glanced at Lily. "You will take care of it?"

"Yes, of course," Lily murmured.

That was weird—Lily's easy capitulation seemed at odds with that strong personality Gwen had mentioned.

"Thank you," I said and glanced at Dan, wondering why he hadn't moved yet.

He folded his arms and suddenly looked like someone even I wouldn't want to mess with. "I have a few questions of my own."

Fang said, OOH. THIS OUGHTA BE INTERESTING. THINK THEY'LL FIGHT?

Over Lily? I hoped not.

"Yes?" Alejandro asked with a raised eyebrow.

Dan ignored Alejandro and looked at Lily. "You couldn't stand the fact that I treated you as an equal? You had to become undead so you could play servant to your master?"

Lily just glared at him.

"She is no servant," Alejandro protested with a smile. "She is my trusted lieutenant, as are Luis and the other two you saw the other night. No one else has made it as far as fast as she has."

"Release her from your mind control and let her tell me that."

Luis snorted. "Mind control does not work on other vampires," he said in a contemptuous tone.

"He's right," I said, giving Dan an apologetic glance.

Dan shook his head and said to Lily, "Can we talk alone?"

"No." For the first time, some expression showed in her face—annoyance. "Look, I left because I didn't want you. You couldn't give me the life I deserved so I found someone who could."

Fang laughed. OUCH. THAT'S GOTTA HURT.

Yeah, though Dan looked more angry than hurt. "Okay," I said, rising. "Can we go now?" I asked him softly.

Dan rose. "Sure."

As we headed down in the elevator, I said, "So we both got what we came for."

Dan made a noncommittal sound. "Yeah. But I still don't get how she—or anyone—would make that kind of choice."

Me either, so I just kept my mouth shut. We were headed out of the building toward the truck two blocks away when Fang suddenly growled and I heard the sound of running feet. Before I could really register that fact, something hit Dan in the back and slammed him face first onto the hood of a nearby car.

Crap. A vamp. Had to be—no one else was that fast.

But I didn't have time to help him, because two more vamps were headed my way. Fang leapt for the smaller one, and I braced myself as the other slammed me face-first against the building. Lola burst free.

Hating the way our energy fields intersected and caused his lust to leap to the forefront of his pants, I used my demon strength to kick backward and heard a yelp as my boot connected. His grip loosened and I whirled around and scabbled for the stakes at the small of my back.

I whipped one out and fisted the stake with the flat end against my chest as the undead creep grabbed at the neck of my T-shirt. Sharp yellow fangs darted toward my neck and I pulled him forcefully against me with my free hand.

As he impaled himself against my stake, he gurgled and slid down my chest with a look of wide-eyed surprise.

Fang yelped. A LITTLE HELP HERE!

Fang had been harrying the other vampire to keep her off me, but she had the hellhound cornered and was bringing her foot back to kick him. *Hell, no.* No one messes with my dog.

Too pissed to think straight, I used brute force to slam into her. I got her away from Fang, all right, but I lost my balance, and we fell in a tangle of arms and legs.

She ended up on top and had her hands around my throat in a flash. To hell with biting me—she was determined to choke me to death. I grabbed her hands and was barely able to keep her from cutting off my air entirely, but I didn't dare let go to reach the stakes at my back.

Fang attacked her leg, trying to distract her, but she was so focused on killing me, I don't think she noticed. Maybe I could—

Suddenly, her grip loosened and she fell limp on top of me.

Surprised, I looked past her to see Dan standing above me with blood dripping down his arm onto the stake in her back.

Rubbing my throat, I croaked, "My hero."

Dan snorted. "Yeah, right."

Fang snorted. HEY, I HELPED.

Yes, you did. You're my hero, too.

AW, SHUCKS, TWEREN'T NOTHING.

Sounded like Fang was just fine.

He shook himself. I'M COOL.

I resisted the urge to chuckle and pushed the dead vamp off me, trying to avoid getting the blood on my shirt. Lola subsided, leaving me to deal with my aches and pains. Rising slowly, I told Dan, "No, really, thanks. For some dumb reason, I didn't expect that here. They took me by surprise."

"Me, too," Dan admitted, wincing.

"You're hurt."

Dan glanced down at his right wrist. It oozed blood and he cradled his right arm in his left as he tried to stop the bleeding. "Yeah. He wanted to rip open a vein in my wrist, but the silver stopped him, so he tried to tear off my arm instead."

I glanced down at his attacker. Silver burns marred his face from Dan's jewelry, and he sported a nice new accessory—a stake in his heart. Dan had really held his own, but he didn't heal as easily as Fang and I did. "We need to get you to a hospital."

"No need. Can you get one of those GPS locators from the kit?" I got it out of the truck and he showed me how to activate the beacon.

Dan slumped against the truck. "The ambulance the SCU pick-up team uses isn't just for show. All of them are trained EMTs, too—they'll fix me up and take the vamps with them when they go. Kill two birds with one stone."

Good, 'cause he sure wasn't going to be able help me haul them into the back of the truck with just one arm. I helped him rig a sling for his wrenched shoulder, and we managed to pull the three attackers into a pile and cover them with a tarp before anyone else came along.

As we waited for the ambulance to arrive, Dan said, "Did it seem odd to you that we were attacked just after we had our little talk with Alejandro?"

"Maybe." I thought for a moment. "But wouldn't it be dumb for him to set his people on us, after trying so hard to gain our confidence?"

"Not if he thought we'd end up dead."

"Maybe," I repeated doubtfully. "But he has to know our superiors are aware that we're investigating him, and he would be the first suspect if anything happened to us. It doesn't make sense." I paused. "But what really bothers me is that there were three of them. Vamps don't usually travel in packs."

"Alejandro's people do," he pointed out.

"True, but I can't believe he's that stupid. It's not him I'm worried about."

"Who then?"

"It's the other vamps, the loners we've been staking one-on-one. They don't advertise their locations like Alejandro does. They're less predictable. What if they've started banding together?"

Dan frowned. "If they have, heaven help us mortals."

Try Me

CHAPTER NINE

I woke the next afternoon to the sound of the cell beeping. It startled me because I hadn't heard it go off before. Confused, I stared sleepily at it as Fang stirred beside me. Oh—it was a text message.

I fumbled with the phone, trying to figure out how to read it. I'd never had a phone before 'cause I never needed one. But Jen and her friends texted all the time. How hard could it be?

It took me a few minutes of pushing buttons, but I figured it out. The message said, "Ur sister ran away. Working 4 blood bank. "

What? Who sent this? I checked to see who it was from, but there was no phone number listed, just an email address. Shoot, there went my idea of calling them to demand an explanation. I figured out how to reply and sent them a message. "Who r u?"

No response. I checked the email address again. It was from DU at a wireless company's service. DU? Who did I know with those initials? No one.

They knew I had a sister, knew about the blood banks, and knew my number . . . I ran through the short list of people in my head who knew all that. None of them would have sent me this anonymous message.

The thought of my little sister in the clutches of bloodsuckers made me sick to my stomach. Yes, these were supposed to be the good guy vampires, but Jen was so impressionable, I worried that she might think their lifestyle was normal . . . enviable, even. I couldn't afford not to check it out.

I let Fang out of the bedroom then showered and dressed. I headed into the kitchen for something to eat first and saw Gwen and Dan eating lunch in the dining room. Strange—I hadn't heard him come in.

They were laughing about something and Dan caught Gwen in a careless one-armed hug. It was obvious they really cared about each other. My heart squeezed in envy. I wanted that—the in-jokes, the teasing, the love of a family. Did they have any idea how lucky they were?

Gwen spotted me and waved me over. "I made quesadillas for lunch. Want one?"

Fang popped in through the doggy door then, sniffing eagerly. I'LL TAKE ONE.

"Sure," I said. *I'll share*, I promised Fang

Dan turned around and he looked a little banged-up, with his right arm in a sling and a bandage around his wrist, mostly covered with a button-down shirt.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as Fang lifted his nose toward the bandage and sniffed.

He shrugged. "Well, I won't win an arm-wrestling contest anytime soon, but I'm fine. I think they disinfected it quickly enough. Can't imagine what was under that guy's nails."

I shuddered, imagining the possibilities. When Fang stopped sniffing and didn't look worried, I assumed all the vampire cooties were gone. "Hear anything on who they were or why they attacked us?"

"Not really. I talked to Ramirez. They all fit descriptions of those on his most wanted list, but none of them had worked together before that he knew of."

"Not the type to play well in Alejandro's organization?"

"On the surface, no. But who knows what the New Blood Movement is really after?"

I shrugged and told him about the text message.

He and Gwen both looked at it, but neither had any more clue than I did who it might be from. I decided to check it out before work.

After we ate lunch and Gwen admonished me to be careful, I looked up the address of the downtown blood bank and drove there on my Valkyrie. Unfortunately, there were no dogs allowed in the building.

I glanced down at Fang. "We'd better not push the service dog angle too much—it's hard to explain since you're not wearing a vest or even a collar. And there aren't any vamps out during the day, anyway."

TRUE. AND THERE'S NO WAY I'M WEARING ONE OF THOSE SISSY VESTS. AS FOR A COLLAR, FORGET IT.

Couldn't blame him there. I helped him remove his goggles. "If Jen smells of vamp, can you tell which vamp it is?"

He jumped down to the ground and cocked his head. MAYBE. EAU DE VAMPIRE IS PRETTY MUCH THE SAME FROM ONE UNDEAD TO ANOTHER, THOUGH THERE ARE SOME DIFFERENCES. I CAN TRY.

Good enough—and it was worth a shot. I found Jen easily enough. She looked about twelve years old in her blond ponytail and sweater set as she served refreshments. The donors at this blood bank came from a slightly better class. Then again, only the impersonal old-fashioned medical donation could be made during the day. The other kind that stained men's pants and made them look foolish had to wait for the vampires to rise for the night.

Jen's jugular was still unpunctured, thank heavens. And thank Alejandro's policy on volunteers.

"Val," Jen exclaimed and hugged me, though it was a bit stiffer than normal. "I'm sorry for the scene the other day. And I'm real sorry Mom and Dad kicked you out because of me."

"That's okay," I assured her. "It was time for me to move out, anyway. And my partner found me another place right away, so it wasn't a problem." Now, to get her within range of Fang's nose "Can we talk outside?"

"Why?" Jen asked suspiciously.

I cast around for a reason she'd buy. "Because I had to leave my dog outside and I don't want to leave him alone too long."

As I led Jen out the door, I added casually, "I hear *you've* left home as well."

Jen whirled on me. "Is that why you're here? I thought you of all people would understand."

"Understand what, Jennifer?"

"That I couldn't live there anymore, couldn't take their small-mindedness."

She had a point, but . . . "They're just concerned for you," I said in soothing tones. "They have a right to be." Odd that Jen would so completely rebel and go over to the dark side, reject her parents. Just last week she'd been all gung-ho to help me hunt down and kill every last vampire on earth. "You promised me you wouldn't try to find out more about vampires."

"Yeah, well, I changed my mind," Jen said with a sniff. "Besides, I'm not doing this for you anymore. I'm doing something important here, helping the Movement save the lives of innocent people by providing the people of the night with safer, more convenient options for feeding their hunger."

I snorted. That was an interesting way to spin it. "But where will you live? Volunteer positions pay nothing."

"Oh, but they're paying me now. Besides, one of the lawyers here is helping me file for emancipation. Don't worry about me."

But I knew how complicated being on your own could be—I was still trying to figure it all out myself. "I'm your sister. Of course I'm going to worry. Maybe you can stay with me."

Jennifer shook her head. "Alejandro has a place for his people—I'm staying there."

"You have got to be kidding me. You can't—"

But I broke off when Jen's pleasant expression turned annoyed and suspicious. If I wanted to find out more about what was happening with my sister, I needed to stay on her good side, not piss her off. I changed the subject. "I thought Alejandro was supposed to fire you."

Jen's eyes narrowed at me. "Was that your doing? Well, they tried, but I refused to quit and they hired me full-time. They really value me."

Wondering how to beat some sense into the girl's head, I said gently, "It's not healthy for you to work there, Jen. Vampires are unnatural creatures with a craving for human blood."

"I know that, and I think it's cool that they're trying to find a way to make it work without hurting humans."

This wasn't working, so I took another tack. "At least you're working during the daylight hours. I hope that continues."

It was more of a question than a statement, but Jennifer didn't respond. She wasn't promising anything. I sighed. Was it possible she was in thrall to someone in the Movement? If so, and I could just figure out which one, I could force the creature to release my little sister. Carefully, I said, "It sounds like you've made friends with one of them."

"Not just one—at least half a dozen. They're not as bad as you think."

"Do you have any *particular* friends in the Movement?" I persisted.

Jen frowned. "No." Then, more suspiciously, she asked, "Why?"

"No reason," I lied, then looked for a way to distract her. I led her over to my motorcycle. "Here, I don't think you got a chance to meet my dog the other day. His name's Fang."

Fang was still sitting by the Valkyrie. *Get a good whiff of her*, I told him mentally.

"Oh, how cute," Jen exclaimed.

She rushed to pet the part-hellhound dog who acted like a frisky puppy with her attention. I noticed he got a lot of sniffing in, though.

"I'm so happy you have new friends," Jen said when she was through petting the dog. "Just like me."

Not exactly . . .

With one last caress on Fang's head, Jen said, "I'd better get back to work. Thanks for ignoring Mom and Dad's orders and coming by to see me."

She made me feel kind of guilty for having ulterior motives for seeing her. I gave Jen another hug. "It was nice to see you."

I wanted to haul her butt back home, but Jen had already proved she wouldn't stay there, especially if she was looking at emancipation. Better to stay on her good side so she'd come to me for help when she needed it. Now I was glad she'd used my reputation to protect herself. Alejandro's people would certainly think twice before they messed with the Slayer's sister.

But that didn't mean I wouldn't worry. "But if you need anything, call me right away, you hear? Any time, day or night. You still have the numbers where you can reach me?"

"Yes, I still have them," Jen said cheerfully.

As she left, I asked Fang, "Smell any vamps on Jen?"

WELL, DUH. SHE WORKS AT ONE OF THEIR BLOOD BANKS.

"Yeah, but I mean did you recognize any of the scents?"

NO, BUT SHE HAS AT LEAST FOUR DIFFERENT SCENTS ON HER.

"Will you recognize them again if you smell them?"

PROBABLY, THOUGH MOST SMELL PRETTY MUCH ALIKE. BESIDES, A BLOODSUCKER DOESN'T HAVE TO ACTUALLY BE IN CONTACT WITH HER TO ENSLAVE HER MIND, YOU KNOW.

I know. Crap. I'd hoped it would be obvious if she was enthralled and if so, by who. No such luck. I'd just have to find out another way.

I drove home and Dan was still there. I told him what had happened.

He frowned. "If she'd been my kid sister, I would have gone all Rambo on her ass and had her locked in her room for a year."

I shrugged. That's what I would like to do, but . . . "My parents tried that. It didn't work." Biting my lip, I explained, "I know Jen. If I try to force her, she'll dig her heels in and turn even more stubborn. It's better to help her find a way to change her own mind, by showing her the truth about the vampires she's now idolizing."

"Aren't you worried about her? Worried that she might be enthralled?"

"Of course, but if she is, the vamp can enslave her mind so she thinks only what he wants her to think. The only way to break the spell is to convince her master to let her go . . . or kill him."

"So our challenge is to find out if she's enthralled and if so, which one has her under control."

Our challenge? Then he really did think of us as a team. It gave me a warm feeling. Not as great as having a family, but it was nice. Really nice. I smiled. "Right."

"It's probably Alejandro."

COULD BE, Fang said. SHE SMELLED A LITTLE OF HIM.

"Maybe. But it's probably someone subordinate to him. The way she spoke of him was more as a distant boss."

"Legally, she should be at home."

"Yeah, I know. But the best way to get her there is to play it my way. Besides, she's filed for emancipation from my parents."

He thought for a moment. "Okay. she's your kid sister. Your family. Your call."

Grateful that he was being reasonable, I smiled at him.

Dan snapped his fingers. "Speaking of family, that reminds me. I did some research on the net on Lucas Blackburn."

"You did?" I asked eagerly. "Did you find him?"

"Yes, sort of. I'm sorry, but the only Lucas Blackburn I could find died a couple of years ago."

I frowned, trying to hide my disappointment.

"But he had a son—a Micah Blackburn, who is still in San Antonio. If it's the same man."

It had to be. And if Micah was Lucas Blackburn's son, maybe he shared the same demon, too. It was worth talking to him, anyway. "Where does he live?"

"I'm not sure, but he owns a club on the River Walk called Purgatory."

I felt excited yet apprehensive at the same time. "You think we can find him there?"

"I assume so. He not only owns it, he . . . performs there."

"Really When?"

"Most nights, I think."

"Then I have to go tonight," I declared. I had to see him, know if he was like me.

"Are you sure you want to?" He had an odd expression on his face, as if there was something he wasn't saying.

"Of course, why wouldn't I?" *Because I'm scared to death he'll reject me, too?* I shook my head. If I didn't go, I'd never know . . . and that would be worse than any rejection.

"Okay," Dan said doubtfully. "You, uh, want me to go with you?"

"Would you?"

"Sure."

"Then yes, I'd appreciate it." Just in case Micah turned out to be a real jerk.

But I had a feeling—a really good feeling—that he was nothing of the kind.

#

Later that night, I surveyed my closet and dithered over the choices. I felt a little nervous about meeting Micah, and going to a club. I'd never been to one before and didn't want to wear the wrong thing.

Faded jeans and T-shirts made up the bulk of my meager wardrobe, but it didn't seem right to wear my working clothes to a club. I pulled out a pair of nice jeans along with a black turtleneck and a dark red v-necked sweater Mom had given me and showed them to Fang. "Which sweater do you think is most appropriate for a club?"

I was kidding, but Fang took my question seriously and regarded the clothing with a critical eye.

NEITHER. He nosed through my closet and poked a long-sleeved white blouse with his nose. WEAR THIS WITH THE FLORAL VEST. IT'LL HIDE THE STAKES.

Good point—after being surprised by vamps last night, I didn't want to go anywhere unarmed. I put the outfit on that Fang had chosen, amused by the thought of taking fashion advice from a hellhound. Then again, it had to be better than my nonexistent style sense.

GWEN CAN HELP YOU WITH THE FACE PAINT. SHE'S GOOD AT THE GIRLIE STUFF.

True. And Gwen was more than happy to oblige. She helped me put on a little make-up and loaned me a cute pair of dangly earrings.

She stood back and looked at me approvingly. "There. You look more feminine . . . softer."

"You really think so?" I had no experience with these sorts of things, but I kind of liked this softer side of Val.

TOTALLY ROCKIN', BABE.

"Oh, yeah," Gwen said. "Trust me, you look hot."

No, no. That wasn't what I was going for.

BUT NOT *TOO* HOT, Fang amended. JUST RIGHT FOR A CLUB.

I relaxed a little. Good—I wasn't going there to find a boyfriend or anything . . . just Micah Blackburn.

So why was my stomach churning like a blender set on puree?

I knew my expectations were way too high. No one could be the combination of family, mentor, and best friend that I longed for. Realistically, I'd be lucky if he would at least agree to meet with me. But I had to try.

"Thanks—I appreciate your help." I said to both of them.

"No problem," Gwen said. "Have fun."

I sent a question to Fang, asking if he was okay sitting home.

YEAH. CLUBS ARE NOISY AND THE PEOPLE THERE JUST ACT STUPID.

Okay, I'll come by and get you if we go hunting.

Fang settled in happily with Gwen, so I went to Dan's townhouse and knocked. He answered, looking really good in jeans and a soft navy blue sweater.

Dan took in my appearance. "Very nice. I've never seen you look so . . . feminine."

My face heated and I felt suddenly awkward. I wasn't real used to compliments and didn't know how to react. My eyes locked with his and I couldn't help but sway toward him, like he was a magnet and I was a hapless pile of filings.

Wow—he smelled great, with a musky, compelling, primal scent. Lola agreed, sending a warm tingling through my body, urging me to combine my yin with his yang.

No way. If his yang got anywhere near my yin, we'd both be in big trouble.

I backed up a step or two and took a deep breath, forcing my demon into submission. "Thank you," I said briefly. At least I assumed it was a compliment. I resisted the urge to tell him how great he looked in return. "Ready to roll?"

"Sure."

He insisted on driving again, saying his shoulder felt much better, and I didn't argue. Having him behind me on the motorcycle would be a very bad idea. Instead, we rode in near silence to Purgatory, both of us lost in our own thoughts, lost somehow in our own private purgatories. I knew mine had a demon in residence. I wasn't sure what populated Dan's private hell. Maybe doubt, questions about how a vampire life was better than a life with him.

The nightclub was in a large two-story building on the River Walk that was jammed with people, even on a Monday night. Apparently, Micah was doing a thriving business. We entered, and were immediately engulfed in the world of Purgatory . . . dark, seductively lit with red lights, and throbbing with a heavy bass beat that I felt more than heard. It made the walls tremble.

Here, in the darkened foyer, the noise of merriment was muffled, and the dim light illuminated our options. The club was divided into four main areas—one each for jazz, rock, hip hop and rap, and ladies only. The club must be well sound-proofed, for I could barely hear the music from each one.

A man suddenly appeared from out of the darkness, looking like a clone of Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula, complete with white pancake make-up and fake fangs. "Have you been to Purgatory before?" he asked in a dramatic fake Transylvanian accent.

I suppressed a smile, wondering what the guy would do if ever confronted with a real vampire. "No, but we're looking for someone," I said. "His name is Micah."

The fake vamp laughed softly. "Yes, all the women look for Micah." He slanted a sly glance at Dan. "But the men would just as soon he not be found."

So Micah was a real ladies' man, huh? "This is different," I explained. "I want to talk to him about his father." When the vamp looked skeptical, I remembered what I'd told Dan and added, "I think we might be related." If lust demon blood ran through both our veins, we had to be related somehow, right?

The vamp shook his head and dropped the fake accent to sound pure Texan. "Nice try, but I've seen far more original attempts to meet Micah, and trust me, none of them work."

Exasperated, I said, "Look, Lucas Blackburn helped me out when I was a kid and I just want to talk to his son." When the man didn't look convinced, I said, "Just tell him, okay? He can decide if he wants to see me or not. My name is Val Shapiro."

The vamp shrugged. "Okay, I'll ask him after his set, but don't blame me if he refuses."

I didn't want to think about that possibility. "So he is here tonight?"

Smirking, the Bela Lugosi look-alike resumed his fake accent. "Why, of course. You can always find him entertaining in the Ladies Lounge . . ." And so saying, he backed into a dark corner and disappeared. Nice trick—must be a curtain or something there.

Dan frowned. "I was afraid of that. It's ladies only. They won't let me in."

"I'm sorry," I said, but it wasn't exactly true. Now that meeting Micah was imminent, I realized Dan's ignorance of my true nature might be a problem when I met another potential lust demon. "Would you mind waiting for me?"

He paused. "Are you sure you really want to do this? Maybe it would be better to call him during the day."

Why did he look so concerned? "No, I'm here now. I'd rather get it over with before I lose my nerve."

Dan sighed. "Okay. I'll just have a drink in the rock area."

"Thanks."

Because I was under twenty-one, the guy at the desk stamped my hand with an X and put a red bracelet on me. At least they carded Dan as well. He got a green bracelet.

As Dan headed off to the rock lounge, I opened the door and went up the stairs to the Ladies Lounge, where a heavy beat and screams of feminine laughter filled the air. I was surprised to see three half-naked men on stage, bare chests glistening as they thrust their hips to the music. I'd heard of Chippendales, but . . . geez!

As I watched, one of the dancers ripped off his jeans to reveal a zebra-striped thong that barely covered his, er . . . package. A cheer went up in the room and a couple of women reached for him. He backed away as he continued bumping and grinding to the music. The other two men followed suit and the crowd went crazy.

Weirdly, Lola didn't react at all. Maybe generic commercial lust didn't do it for her. Or maybe I was just too embarrassed. I tried to look away, but was oddly fascinated by the men's hard bodies and the women who were all over them. Whoa. Guess my life was more sheltered than I thought.

My face grew hot. Yeah, I knew how odd it was for me of all people to feel uncomfortable around this, but I was still seven-eighths human. Heck, I'd just barely been kissed. This was totally out of my experience.

Another shout went up as a woman tucked some money into a dancer's thong. Ohmigod—I would never have the nerve to do that. Now I understood why Dan had seemed so uneasy. He must have realized what kind of place this was.

Was Micah one of those guys up on stage? I cringed at the thought. *I hope not.*

I made my way to the other side of the room where hunky bare-chested bartenders were dressed like comic book demons and other denizens of the underworld. Did everyone who worked here dress like something out of the *Encyclopedia Magicka*?

Shouting over the music, I asked one blond devil, "Is Micah on stage?"

"He'll be on later," the man yelled back. "What do you want to drink?"

I ordered a Coke with a twist of lime and sat down in the back to wait for Micah's appearance. Was he a stripper too? *Please, no.* But the odds were he probably was.

After a dancer dressed as a fireman lit more fires than he extinguished and a construction worker demonstrated the proper way to use his tools, the lights went out, then spotlights swept the stage.

A drum roll sounded, then a deep, amplified male voice came over the loudspeaker. "And now, Purgatory is happy to present the one, the only . . . *Micah!*"

Finally. I sat up straighter, making sure I had a good view of the stage. The sudden ear-splitting screams of the women in front told me they knew exactly who Micah was . . . and were *very* happy to see him.

Uneasily, I wondered what his act would be like . . . and if I really wanted to see it.

Abruptly, all the lights went out and the screaming stopped, anticipation hanging heavy in the air. A haunting piped melody filled the room, and a lone spotlight picked out the figure of a man on stage. He was costumed like a satyr, with horns, cloven hooves, a chest sprinkled with dark hair, and shaggy pants that made it appear as if he had fur from his waist to his feet. The crowd watched in fascination as he concentrated on playing the panpipes in his hands.

But none were as absorbed as me. I drank in his features, looking for any confirmation that he hosted a lust demon. He was tall, with a body that was leaner than the guys who had entertained earlier, more dancer than body-builder. With his dark wavy hair curling around his ears, full lips and firm chin, he looked very masculine and very seductive.

I could see his appeal to the other women, though he didn't do it for me personally. I squirmed a little, remembering the acts I'd just witnessed. Was I about to see a lot more of Micah than I wanted?

The haunting melody came to a lingering close, then with a wicked glance at the audience, Micah launched into a wild Celtic tune. An invisible orchestra picked up the melody and Micah abandoned the pipes to leap around the stage to the music, graceful as Baryshnikov, yet masculine as Schwarzenegger.

The women seemed spellbound as they watched his dance speak of passion, sensuality, and enticing erotic possibilities. A sudden dramatic pause in the music brought him to a halt in front of one audience member. He beckoned to her and she locked gazes with him then rose slowly to lay her trembling hands on his chest as the women around her sighed audibly.

Micah embraced her and lust surged in the room as the music swelled again and he whirled her in the dance. The woman, obviously no audience plant, was content to be moved in whatever direction Micah chose as he simulated a courtship. Then, when he was through with her, he twirled her back to her table. With her fingers lingering on his arm and gaze glued to his face, she sank bonelessly into her seat.

He glanced around for another partner and caught my eye. I shrank back and he looked startled for a moment, but recovered quickly and spun away to repeat the performance with another audience member.

Okay, this wasn't too uncomfortable. But that weird feeling in the air . . . what was that? It felt like . . . like satisfaction. Like a thirst finally slaked.

Lola stirred and I suddenly realized what had happened. Just as a succubus resided within me, Micah definitely hosted an incubus . . . and he was feeding it with the lust from the audience.

Shocked, I didn't know what to think. This had been forbidden to me all my life, yet he did it in full public view, almost like he was doing the dirty in front of an audience.

Finally, the dance ended with Micah frozen in a theatrical pose and the lights went out. Total silence reigned for a long moment, then the lights came up and the women went nuts—hooting and hollering as if it was the best thing they'd ever experienced. And perhaps it was, especially for those who had been seduced in the dance. Those few seemed stunned and completely satisfied, but at least he hadn't totally drained them of energy. They didn't seem to regret being singled out for Micah's special attention, either.

I felt a touch on my sleeve, and the Bela Lugosi look-alike was there, saying, "Micah will see you now."

I froze. Was I really ready for this?

Well, too late to back out now. Repressing a surge of elation tinged with apprehension, I followed Bela backstage to a simple unmarked room. Seeming a little embarrassed, probably for not believing me earlier, Bela showed me in, saying, "Micah will be with you shortly."

He left me alone in an office that was bigger than I expected. Not ostentatious, just simple and elegant, with comfy-looking chairs for guests. Not knowing what to expect, I stood in the middle of the space. After a few minutes, I heard the sound of a door opening, and turned toward it. Evidently the adjoining door was to a bathroom, for Micah stood there, smelling fresh from the shower, his hair wet.

Barefoot, but now wearing jeans and a shirt, he paused in buttoning his shirt to give me an enigmatic look, saying, "At long last, we meet . . . Valentine."

"Val," I managed. "I go by Val."

"I know. And I've been waiting a long time for you to find us." He held out his arms, offering a hug, and though I'd avoided personal contact with men all my life, I moved into his arms as if he were a long-lost brother.

Oh God, that felt good. Tears stung my eyes and I hugged him back fiercely. This . . . I had missed *this*, even though I'd never had it before. I'd never been able to hug men, not even Rick, for fear of the demon getting loose and sucking all of the life from them.

I didn't know if it was because we carried similar sorts of demons, but my succubus and Micah's incubus were quiescent, leaving me feeling like a normal person as I held him close.

What a wonderful sensation. In fact, I felt full of emotions, almost bursting with it, though I couldn't have said what those emotions were. Not romantic, not sleazy in any way, just overjoyed to find someone I could be myself with.

We broke the hug and Micah led me to a chair in front of the desk. As I seated myself, he leaned against the desk and smiled at me. "So what finally brought you to seek me out?"

I surreptitiously wiped the moisture from my eyes and said, "I just learned about your father a few days ago, how he helped my parents help me. I had no idea there were others like me. Are we related?" Did I actually have family on my father's side?

"It's very possible we're some sort of distant cousins, but your father didn't know much about his background. He was abandoned as a child."

I let out a bitter laugh. "I know how that feels." I gave him a curious look. "Did you know him?"

"A little. I was about nine when he died, but my father knew him better, and told me about him."

For the first time, I wondered what my father had been like, if he was really the monster Mom and my own imagination had made him out to be. "Will you tell me what you know?"

"I remember him as a smiling, happy man, always ready with a joke. But he had dark periods, when he struggled with his true nature."

That fit what I remembered of him. "Do you know what happened between him and my mother?" All I had was my five-year-old perspective, kind of limited. "Mom wouldn't talk about it."

Micah nodded. "I don't know the whole story, but you do know your father seduced your mother?"

"Yes." And Mom had been unable to resist the incubus part of him—a fact for which she had never forgiven him.

"Your mother was a very beautiful woman and your father fell in love with her the moment he saw her. He seduced her, then married her when he learned she was pregnant, hoping he could keep his nature under control. But your mother couldn't resist the incubus in your father, and it really bothered her when she lost all reason around him, so she divorced him and forbade him to see her soon after you were born."

"But I remember seeing him," I said in puzzlement. A few flashing memories of a handsome, laughing man who treated me like a princess.

"Yes, he still had visiting rights to see *you*—she wouldn't take that away from him. Then . . . something happened."

"What?"

"I hoped you could tell me that," Micah said seriously. "What happened when your father visited you on your fifth birthday?"

"Oh. That." Guilt filled me. I'd been trying to forget it for years, but horribly, it was the one clear memory I had of my father.

"Can you tell me?" Micah asked. "It's the only piece of the puzzle I don't have."

"I . . . it's difficult." As he waited patiently, I gathered my courage and told him. "I was a little over-excited since it was my birthday and my daddy had come to see me. For some reason, this time Mom didn't leave right away when he came." I shrugged. "I knew all the details of what happened, but didn't really understand it all until years later."

I paused, wondering how I could possibly put it into words. "He was . . . very glad to see Mom, very charming and cajoling. I think he was trying to convince her to come back to him, even though she'd already married Rick and had another daughter by that time."

When I paused, Micah nodded encouragingly.

"She kept refusing and trying to leave, but he wouldn't let her. Then . . . he did something. Something I didn't understand at the time. All I knew was that I felt something strange reach out from inside him toward Mom. I could tell Mom thought it was a bad thing, and I felt really afraid, especially since she seemed sort of scared, but sort of wanting it, too."

Micah nodded. "You would have just begun to recognize his incubus powers at that age, but you couldn't understand what was happening."

Glad he understood, I continued. "All I knew is that he was doing something bad and my mother was afraid. I asked him to stop, but he grabbed her and kissed her, and that funny feeling came again." I knew now I had sensed the incubus my father had been unable—or unwilling—to suppress.

"What did you do?" Micah asked softly.

"What could I do? I was only five. But . . . I beat on his leg with my fists and yelled at him to let her go." I still remembered the surprise on his face. "He did, and I jumped between them, holding my arms out to protect Mom, telling Daddy he was a very bad man and should leave us alone."

Micah kept silent, letting me tell the rest of the story my way. "He . . . he looked totally horrified. Stricken. Then he rushed out of there like the fiends of hell were at his heels." I blinked back tears. "I never saw him again." He had killed himself later that day.

Micah nodded. "It makes sense. From what others have said, I know that he often thought himself a monster."

I nodded. I knew the feeling. And though I knew I'd saved my mother from violation that day, I also knew I had the same possibilities lying dormant inside me. If my father, a strong adult, couldn't handle it, how could I be expected to?

Micah continued. "Obviously, he couldn't stand what he was doing to the woman he loved, especially when his five-year-old daughter chastised him for it."

I had to say what Micah must be thinking. "So I'm the reason he killed himself."

Micah looked truly horrified. "Is that what you've believed all these years?"

"It's the truth." It was always unspoken between Mom and me, but I knew I was the reason my father had committed suicide. If I hadn't jumped between the two of them, he might still be alive today.

Micah dropped to his knees to gather me in a hug once again. "It's not your fault, Val. He couldn't handle the two sides of our nature, couldn't reconcile the two and live with it."

Intellectually, I'd known that for a long time, but emotionally, I still felt I'd driven my father to suicide. I deepened the hug, letting the tears flow. "So you . . . don't blame me?"

He moved away from me a bit to look into my tear-filled face. "Of course not. How can you think that?"

I waved my hand vaguely. "You and your father knew about me, but never contacted me directly."

"It had nothing to do with you. Suffice it to say that your mother didn't want any reminders of your father around, didn't want anything that would jeopardize you fitting in with the rest of the world."

Yes, that sounded like Mom. "I wish you'd ignored her."

"We wanted to," Micah assured me.

"Why didn't you?"

"*Because* of you."

"I don't understand."

"You had a tough enough time growing up part demon in that household—"

"You know what my life was like?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes, we kept track of you as much as possible, helped where we could."

"How? Why?"

"Since my father and I shared your nature, we knew when the critical times would come, knew what would happen to you as you grew up. Father visited your parents to let them know what was coming, to help them help you

deal with something they couldn't possibly understand." He smiled at me. "There aren't that many of us, and we need to help each other out. Besides, as you said, we're probably related somehow."

"But I still don't understand why you didn't contact me after I got older. We could have met outside the family, somewhere just the two of us, like this."

He regarded me for a moment, as if unsure what to tell me. "Because I lead a very different life than you do. I wasn't sure how you would react."

True, I really didn't know much about him. I laughed a little uneasily. "Why? Do you do more than dance with those women? You strip?"

He stood, looking uncomfortable. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh. You mean because you let the incubus control you and I keep the succubus repressed."

He cocked his head at her. "You speak of your gift as if it were a separate part of you."

Gift? More like a curse. "Isn't it?"

"No, it's not. It's part of who you are. You can't compartmentalize it, shove it aside. You have to come to terms with it, embrace it."

"But isn't that dangerous? I saw what it did to my father. That was a lesson I'll never forget—demon bad, human good."

"It doesn't have to be dangerous—"

"I don't believe that," I cut in. "When I was sixteen and kissed a boy for the first time, I almost drained him of his energy, his life force. I almost killed him."

"You were young and didn't understand your powers. It doesn't have to be that way. And it's dangerous to keep it suppressed the way you do. I can feel your power, straining to get out, caged like a beast."

Good analogy—that's how I often thought of the demon within me. "But I don't keep my 'gift' pent up all the time," I insisted. "I let it out by hunting vampires. That feeds the lust in a different way."

He shook his head. "But that way is so much less satisfying. The only way to truly satisfy your craving is to use it sexually. I told your parents that, but I guess they didn't find it a viable option."

Hardly. A bit uncomfortable discussing this, I said, "I can't do what you do." Then I would really lose all ties to my family. Besides, I was so not ready. "What if I take advantage of someone? What if I kill them? Heck, what if I take my father's route and kill myself?"

"Look," Micah said. "It isn't something you can just ignore and hope it will go away."

"I know that." Only too well.

"You don't understand. You're like an uptight parent who thinks if they say, 'No sex' their teenagers will fall right into line, cross their legs and ignore their hormones. You can't ignore this. You can't take a pill for it. But you can keep it from destroying your life. When you bleed it off a little at a time, like I do, you don't get the cravings. You can control it easily, and you don't hurt anyone."

"Do you think those women you . . . seduced . . . feel the same?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it," Micah said seriously. "You saw the act. They all want to be with me, they all want to experience what I can give them. And I only take from those willing to give."

He sounded more resigned than pleased by the fact, and I realized he'd probably never been able to have a normal relationship either. It was kind of sad.

"It's different for me. I can't . . . do what you do."

"Too bad. You've kept it suppressed for so long that when you finally let loose, there's no telling what will happen."

That didn't sound good. "So, I can't ever . . . you know . . .?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Be intimate with a guy?"

Well, yeah. I shrugged, my face hot.

"I take it you have someone specific in mind. Does he know what you are?"

"No, and I want to keep it that way."

Micah considered for a moment. "Well, you could let loose with someone else first, test it out and see what happens."

No way. "That's not an option."

"I didn't think so." He thought for a moment. "I've never been in this situation so I don't know how to advise you. But I'm sure you have a lot more control now than you did when you were sixteen. Maybe it won't be a problem. Maybe you can keep it under control."

Maybe. But could I chance it?

A knock sounded at the door and Micah answered it.

It was Dan. Lola perked up at the sight of him, but I forcibly restrained myself from having a reaction. It was just because we'd been talking about him and the possibilities, that was all.

"They told me where to find you," Dan said, his gaze darting back and forth between Micah and me as if trying to gauge what had happened. "Is everything okay?"

"It's great," I assured him. I introduced the two men, fibbing only a little to explain that Micah was my cousin on my father's side, then realized I couldn't continue this discussion in Dan's presence. "I guess I should let Micah get back to work."

Micah nodded and pulled me aside to talk to me privately. "This is the man. I can sense it, sense your response."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"Your reaction is strong. You realize you're either going to have to let loose with him or get him out of your life?"

"Aren't there any other options?" I asked wistfully.

"Not really."

It was a lose-lose situation. If I let loose, I'd probably lose his friendship forever. Either way, I'd never see him again . . . and that was just too depressing to contemplate.

The only solution was to keep on going as I had been and hope I never had to make that choice.

Try Me

CHAPTER TEN

I exchanged phone numbers with Micah and hugged him one last time. "Don't be a stranger. I plan on seeing you. Often."

Micah grinned down at me. "Glad to hear it."

As Dan followed me out of the club, he said, "I take it everything went well?"

"Very well."

"Good. His . . . dancing didn't bother you, then?"

"Not really." I slanted a glance at him. "You knew what he did, and you didn't tell me?"

Dan shrugged. "I wasn't sure how to."

"Doesn't matter. He wasn't like the others. He, uh, didn't take his clothes off."

"That's a relief."

Dan opened the truck door for me, then went around to his side and got in. Looking curious, he asked, "Did you find out why your mother never told you about that side of the family?"

I shook my head. "Look, I'm sorry, but I really don't want to talk about this. I—I . . . don't know how I feel, and I just want to absorb it all, give it a chance to settle in." I cast him an anxious glance. "You understand?"

"Sure." He reached across the wide seat to give my shoulder a squeeze. "Let me know if you want to talk."

"Thanks." As he started the truck, I added thoughtfully, "It's strange. I never knew how much my family meant to me until I lost them."

"I'm glad you found Micah, then."

"Yeah . . . thanks to you."

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable with my gratitude. "Anyone could have done it."

"But you're the one who did, and I thank you for it."

He changed the subject. "Before we hit the streets again, why don't we go over our notes, make a few phone calls to see what we can find out? We can get a lot accomplished that way."

"Okay. Your place or mine?"

"Mine, I guess—I have my notes there."

When we arrived at the townhouses, I followed Dan into his, which was a mirror image of Gwen's. While he made a few phone calls to other SCU members, I called some of Jen's friends. Together, we managed to piece together a picture of what a volunteer did at the blood banks. Brittany was right—the Movement was scrupulous in not using their young workers as blood donors, and none of them had been harmed yet, or turned. Basically, all they did was hand out juice and cookies, direct traffic at the banks, and act as goodwill ambassadors to the public. I felt a little relieved, but not totally.

As Dan handed me a Coke, he said, "We've been distracted by Jennifer and Lily's situations and forgot that Ramirez tasked us with finding out if this vein of vampires is behind the killings."

"Yeah. We've found the vein, but don't know what they're up to."

Dan popped the top on his own Coke. "That's obvious. They're vampires, so what they're up to is murder, mayhem, and mass destruction."

Surprised by the harshness of his tone, I said, "You really think the Movement is responsible for the increased attacks? It could be another group we don't know about yet." Not that I had the warm and fuzzies for Alejandro's group, but I wanted to get it right.

"Vampire attacks have doubled since the Movement started. Is that a coincidence?" Dan sat on the couch and took a slug of his drink. "I don't think so."

I sat next to him, and we both slipped off our shoes to recline companionably on the couch together, our feet up on the coffee table. "But Ramirez says those three who attacked us weren't part of the New Blood Movement."

"So far as he knows."

He sure was cynical tonight. "His information has been accurate so far. Has your investigation shown something different?"

"Not yet. But don't you think it's weird that the lieutenant knows a lot about what is going on with the vampires in the city, but he doesn't know what the Movement is up to?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it means his informant doesn't know."

"So, the informant isn't in the Movement, but someone who knows what the other vamps are doing," Dan said thoughtfully.

"Another vamp?" I suggested.

"Maybe." He made an impatient gesture. "This is getting us nowhere. We need to find out what Alejandro is planning to do with the organization he's building."

"I think he's on the level. I think he built the Movement to do just as he said—improve vampire and human relationships."

Dan gave me a disbelieving look. "You believe that? Why? Because he's pretty and charming?"

That was insulting. "No, because everything he's said has checked out so far. He really does seem to be trying to make things better."

Dan snorted. "Yeah, right. That's why he turns people like Lily into bloodsuckers . . . because he's such a nice guy."

"Lily is responsible for her own decisions. Why are you trying to act like she had no choice?" I asked, then mocked him with his own words. "Because she's pretty and charming? C'mon Dan, she's just as undead as he is."

Running an impatient hand through his hair, Dan said, "Yeah, It's just hard to believe anyone I know would choose a life like that."

"Are you sure that's all it is?" I asked skeptically.

"Yes, I'm sure. Damn it, I don't want her anymore. She's dead to me now. Literally. You've shown me that." He slanted me a glance full of meaning.

Meaning what, though? Heat suffused my face as I wondered . . . hoped . . . he meant he wanted *me* instead.

No, I couldn't go there. "I'm glad to hear I helped you come to your senses," I hedged.

"That's not what I meant." He moved closer. "There's something between us—chemistry, something, I don't know. Don't you feel it?"

I scooted away as he advanced, until I came up against the end of the couch and couldn't go any farther.

His face inches from my own, he stared into my eyes. "You do, don't you?"

Lola yelled, "Yes!" but I blurted, "No!"

"Why not?" Dan asked with a smile as he caressed my cheek with the back of his fingers.

Ohmigod. I didn't know I could feel like that, all kind of tingly and warm and weak. This wasn't demon-Val—she was more likely to just want to get physical. This part was all human-Val, wanting something all mixed-up and emotional.

But Dan had just asked me why we couldn't share a little tenderness. I was having a hard time figuring that out myself, but I searched for something he would buy. "Because we work together?" I hated the way that came out sounding more like a question than a statement. But he was sorely testing the limits of my hold on Lola.

"So?" he asked as he leaned even closer. "We're both professionals. We won't let this interfere with our jobs." And his slow smile made me feel boneless as he cupped the back of my head with his hand and leaned closer.

Ohmigod. I could sympathize—*really* sympathize—but I had to control my emotions before it was too late to control the demon. How could I stop this? "You're on the rebound," I protested, pressing myself as far into the couch cushions away from him as I could and pushing my hands against his chest.

"Not really. Lily and I haven't been together for two months, and before that it wasn't . . . good."

He leaned down and kissed my neck. Something inside me did a loop the loop of pure joy. Oh, no. I wanted him to do more. I wanted him to stop. I didn't know what the heck I wanted. But the succubus inside me was very clear—it was warm, willing, and waiting . . . for *him*. All I had to do was cooperate.

But how could I? Lord knew I wanted to, but could I rein it in? Could I keep the demon from pulling too much energy while enjoying it on a non-physical level? Unsure, I fired my strongest weapon. "I-I don't want this."

Dan laughed. "The hell you don't." And with that, he kissed me, his lips soft and gentle. I sank into him and he moved his mouth against mine, coaxing me to respond.

I had so many odd feelings going on inside me, I didn't know what to do. That kiss with Johnny Morton had been a pale thing compared to this. Johnny was a boy, but Dan was definitely a man. Was I ready for this?

And he sure knew how to kiss. I couldn't help but react, and the power curled within me, responding to Dan's sensuality. But it didn't try to take charge, didn't try to force him. Instead, Lola seemed content to let Dan rev me up.

Not that he needed any help from the demon to make me go all weak at the knees—he was doing fine all by himself. He broke the kiss off to say in a hoarse voice, "Tell me you don't want this."

Heaven help me, I did—badly. I'd controlled Lola so far, maybe it was possible to keep her from taking over. And why shouldn't I try? Every other girl my age had done this, why couldn't I? I really wanted to know what it was like to make out with a guy.

Feeling as if I were drowning in sensation, I admitted, "I can't tell you that." I dragged his head back down to mine and kissed him with all the pent-up frustration I'd held inside for so long.

He responded in kind and soon we were both breathless, lying half on, half off the couch. Dan rose to his knees and tugged his sweater off over his head, tossing it aside.

"Oh, wow," I breathed. If I hadn't succumbed before, the sight of Dan's chest would have made me drop my defenses in a flash. Lightly sculpted with the sleek muscles of a man who trained in martial arts, his chest was sprinkled with light brown hair and a couple of old scars.

And I thought he was hot before A surge of hunger licked through me, prowling through me like a predator on the hunt.

He reached for my blouse but I grabbed his hand and held it away. My face was way too hot, and the rest of my body wasn't doing much better. I couldn't go any further, couldn't risk the demon getting loose, though I was surely tempted. What would it feel like to have his hands on my bare skin? On those parts that were aching with need?

As if Lola sensed I couldn't be trusted to give her what she wanted, she burst free, sending greedy tentacles of power whipping into Dan.

No, no, no. As I watched in helpless horror, desperately trying to gather up the shredded remains of my control, Dan reared back, his body bowed with surprise. Dan's eyes widened and he gripped my arms tighter as he shuddered in ecstasy.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening.

He released me and collapsed back onto the couch, and I used everything in my power to keep the succubus from drinking in all that delicious energy and draining him. I scrambled away from him to a chair in the far corner, hoping that the distance would make it easier on both of us. When I finally had it back under wraps, I asked, "Dan, are you all right?"

He lay sprawled back on the couch, trying to catch his breath. "My God," he gasped. "What . . . what the hell was that?"

"A really good make-out session?" I ventured. But the anger in his eyes told me he wasn't buying it, and I'd better come up with a plausible explanation—fast.

Dan scowled. "The hell it was. That was something different. It felt like . . . like when Charlene had her hooks in me. Are you a vampire?" he asked tightly.

"No!" He wasn't thinking clearly. "You saw me handle silver and sunlight with no problem." But he was probably feeling manipulated and controlled right now . . . violated. Who could blame him? I watched him anxiously.

He narrowed his eyes. "Okay, so you're not a vampire. But you're not quite human, either, are you? I saw your eyes flash some weird purple light. What are you?"

I bit my lip, looking anywhere but at him. How could I tell him?

"Are you some kind of . . . of . . . hell spawn?"

Oh yeah, right. That's *so* not the first thing I would have thought. "So far as I know, there's no such thing as hell spawn," I said indignantly.

"Quit avoiding the question. What are you?"

I squirmed a little, then admitted, "My . . . my great-grandparent was a demon."

"I've been kissing a *demon*?" He scrambled to his feet.

"Only one-eighth demon," I said, my eyes pleading with him to understand.

"So . . . what?" he asked, retreating to a chair. "You go all bumpy and scaly now?"

Damn it, I knew it. I knew he'd think of me as a monster. Why had I been so stupid? "Don't be ridiculous. Do I look like a lizard to you?"

"No . . . But how am I supposed to know what you'll do?"

I sighed. "There are all kinds of demons."

"What kind are *you*?"

"I-I'm part succubus."

"What the hell is that?"

Still avoiding his gaze, I said, "A succubus is a female . . . lust demon. I call mine Lola."

"*Lust* demon? You mean you forced me to feel the way I did?"

He sounded betrayed. I met his gaze then. "Not entirely. Our attraction to each other just made it stronger."

"What is 'it' exactly? What does a succubus demon do?"

"Absorbs the energy generated by lust."

He stared at me for a moment as he took in the implications of my confession. When he finally regained his powers of speech, he asked, "You *fed* on me?"

"A little," I admitted. "But I stopped it as soon as I could."

"You've been feeding on me all this time?"

"You make it sound like I seduced you against your will," I protested. "You started this."

"Maybe," he gritted out. "But you're the one who finished it."

"Not me," I said, hating the way I sounded so desperate and pleading. "It was the demon inside me. I thought I could control her, keep her hidden, but you were such a good kisser, I lost it."

He rejected my flattery with a sharp movement of his hand. "You said earlier you were one-eighth demon. Now you're trying to tell me it's living inside you like a separate being? What does that mean? What Lola wants, Lola gets?"

I hunched a shoulder. "No. I have her under control . . . most of the time."

"So can you get rid of her?"

"I wish I could, but it doesn't work like that. Lola really is a part of me." I shook my head sadly. "I'm so sorry. Micah thought I might be able to control it—"

"Wait," Dan said, "Micah is a succubus too?"

"Actually, a male lust demon is called an incubus."

"Whatever. Is he one, too?"

"Yes. He inherited it from his father. I inherited from my father." I clutched a pillow to my stomach, feeling miserable. "He couldn't control the incubus, so he killed himself."

"Well, that explains a lot . . . Does Ramirez know what you are?"

"Yeah. I don't know how, but he does."

"So that makes three lust demons so far, two living. How many are there in the city?"

"I-I don't know. Until I found Micah, I thought I was the only one."

He looked thoughtful. "You said there's more than one kind of demon. Those costumes in Purgatory . . . they weren't costumes, were they? Those were real demons."

That forced my head to snap up. Were they real? "I don't know. If they were, I didn't know it either. Fang could tell you—"

I broke off suddenly, wishing I could rewind what I'd just said.

"Fang?" he repeated. "The *dog* is a demon?"

"To some extent," I said lamely. "Like me. He's part hellhound, which is why he can sniff out vampires and other demons." Plus he talked to me in my head, but I wasn't sure Dan was ready to hear that yet.

Dan shook his head in disbelief. "Does *everyone* have supernatural blood but me?"

"Of course not. And just because we're part demon doesn't mean we're all bad, you know. Just like you, we try to live normal lives. We eat, sleep, drink—"

"Suck blood, feed on sexual energy . . ."

"That's not fair," I protested.

"Fair?" he repeated, his voice rising. "What the hell is fair about any of this? How can I tell what's real now? How can I tell what feelings are really mine, and which are caused by Lola?" He glared at me. "Turn it off."

"What?"

"Turn off your powers. I want to know what I really feel without them."

I shook my head slowly. "It's not like a faucet. I can't turn it off. I can only keep it subdued . . . like now. Anything you're feeling at this moment comes from you, not me."

"How do I know that?"

"You have my word on it."

He snorted. "Your word. Right. The word of a woman who's passing for human and lying about being a demon to her own partner?"

"I had a good reason for not telling you," I snapped.

"Yeah—so you and Lola could suck me dry without my knowing it."

"No, if I'd wanted to do that, I could have done it the first time we met. But I knew you wouldn't understand."

"What's there to understand? No wonder you're so good at killing the monsters—you're one of them." He turned away, running a hand over his face. "I'd appreciate it if you'd leave now. I'll ask Ramirez for another partner first thing tomorrow."

Whoa. Talk about a slam in the gut. I don't know why, but I hadn't expected that. I guess I thought we could work it out, find some way to continue working together. Guess not.

And it was all my fault. Life had just been starting to turn good again, but I had to go and ruin it all.

No, that was wrong. Lola had ruined it, and now Dan thought I was some kind of monster. There was nothing else I could do or say. As tears blinded me, I blinked them back, gathered up my things, and left.

Try Me

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I woke from a restless sleep the next afternoon after a night of chewing myself out. Though I didn't get much sleep, I felt stronger than I ever had before, more vibrantly alive. I'd have liked to attribute it to healthy living, but knew it was because Lola had fed on Dan's energy.

I was just relieved I'd stopped it before she had gone too far. But what if I hadn't? I shuddered. That would have been a catastrophe. Dan was already angry with me. If I'd taken any more from him, he would really be pissed . . . or dead.

But what I hated most was how good I felt, like I'd been thirsty my whole life and had just gotten a tiny sip of the nectar of the gods. The only problem was, I didn't want just a sip. I wanted to drink and drink until I filled up all the parched, empty spots in my being. Yeah, mostly it was demon-Val feeling that way, but I feared a lot of it was human-Val, too. Was that sick, or what?

Fang nudged me with his nose, offering comfort. YOU'RE NOT SICK. YOU'RE NORMAL. IT'S THE WHOLE TEEN-AGER HORMONE THING, YOU KNOW.

Maybe. I smiled at him. "Thanks for trying." I just wished I could believe him.

He snuggled closer and licked my hand as I stroked his soft ears.

From now on, I was sticking to dogs. They were sweet, uncomplicated, and loved without reservation. Guys were just too much work.

I should have known better, should have trusted my instincts and never gotten close. I'd thought I could handle it, keep Lola under control. But the succubus had betrayed me at the worst possible moment. And now I was paying the price.

That was the killer. The price was way too high for a few moments of bliss. It had cost me Dan's friendship.

I blinked back tears. People all over the world were pairing up. Would it ever be my turn? Would I ever be able to be myself and find someone to love without giving up my humanity to do it?

The tears did escape then. This just confirmed that I could never get close to a guy again. Not in that way, anyway. Not unless I took Micah's advice and found someone I could take advantage of to feed Lola first.

Yeah, like that would ever happen.

Forget it. I'd just dwindle into an old maid with nothing but hellhounds to keep me company in my senior years.

VAL, I LOVE YA, BUT ENOUGH WITH THE PITY PARTY, ALREADY.

I wiped a tear away and hugged the snarky little mutt, knowing he was just trying to help. Thank heavens I had Micah now. The only person who could possibly understand me, care about me, was one who was exactly like me. I'd just have to be content with having Micah and Fang as my only family.

My cell rang then, and I stared at it, wondering if I should answer it. I didn't really want to talk to anyone right now.

Then again, it could be Micah.

I answered the phone, surprised to hear Ramirez's voice on the other end.

His conversation was short, but not very sweet. "Get your butt down to my office in half an hour."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you when you get here."

"But . . . I'm not even dressed yet." And I really didn't want to talk to anyone in my current mood.

"Forty-five minutes then." His tone was uncompromising.

"But—"

"If you want to keep this job, be here within forty-five minutes." Without waiting for a response, he hung up.

I stared at the phone in disbelief. Dan sure hadn't wasted any time. At least, I assumed that's what had Ramirez so ticked off. Well, there was only one way to find out. I crawled out of bed and headed for the shower. I'd lost enough important things in my life lately, I didn't want to lose my only source of income, too.

I made it to the West Substation with three minutes to spare. The desk sergeant gave Fang a dubious glance, but must have gotten approval from Ramirez, for he sent us both on back.

I swung open the door to the lieutenant's office and stopped dead. Dan was there, sitting across from Ramirez.

Ah, hell. I was so not ready for this. I figured it would just be Ramirez and me. I didn't realize he'd force us to be in the same room together..

Fang growled at Dan as if he were a vampire. I suddenly felt a lot better. Now who was the monster? And, taking my cue from Fang, I decided to not let my pain show. I wouldn't give Dan the satisfaction.

"What is *sbe* doing here?" Dan asked.

Ramirez said, "Have a seat, Val. I promise Dan won't bite."

Fang snorted. YEAH, BUT *I'M* NOT MAKING ANY PROMISES.

Dan made some sort of strangled sound again, but kept his mouth shut. Giving him a wary glance, I sat in the only other chair available . . . next to him.

This time, I was so disappointed in him, so angry at his narrow-minded attitude, that the succubus wasn't even tempted. Lola and I both deserved better.

But as Fang settled protectively between us and Dan tried to scoot farther away, some impulse made me whisper, "Lola says hi."

Dan shot to his feet. "Can I go now?" he asked Ramirez.

YOU GO, GIRL, Fang said, laughing silently.

The lieutenant scowled. "No. Sit down." He glared at both of us as Dan took his seat once more. "Now, what's this about you not wanting to work together any more?"

I shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Ask him. It was his idea."

I could practically feel Dan grow rigid in the chair next to me. "We don't work well together," Dan bit out.

"You have up until now," Ramirez said calmly. "What's different?"

"We're not . . . compatible," Dan explained.

Ramirez scowled. "What the hell do you think this is? *The Bachelor*? I'm not asking you two to live together, just work together."

Dan's chin came up and he matched the lieutenant scowl for scowl. "Well, I can't do that anymore. I want another partner."

I was in full agreement. I didn't want to work with someone who didn't even consider me human.

Fang snuffled my knee. YEAH. THE ONLY PARTNER YOU NEED IS ME.

"I can't do that," Ramirez said. "Everyone else in the unit is already paired up and working well together."

"Then I'll work alone," Dan said.

"I'd prefer it, too," I said, just in case the lieutenant thought he was trying to spare my feelings or something.

He disabused me quickly of that notion. "You will *not* work alone, either of you. It's too dangerous out there without backup."

I shrugged. "I did it before. What's different now?"

"I'll tell you what's different. We have vampires coming out of the freaking woodwork. Attacks have doubled in the last week, and from what I hear, more and more bloodsuckers are being made every day."

"Maybe that's because of the time of the year," I said, offering a possible explanation. "Halloween, Days of the Dead . . ."

"Maybe," Ramirez conceded. "Except now that the Days of the Dead are over, vampire activity hasn't lessened any. Fortunately, some vampires must still be keeping the media under compulsion not to notice—or not to reveal what they know. Otherwise, there would be wide-spread panic by now." He leaned forward, spearing us both in turn with his intense gaze. "It's dangerous out there, and we can't afford to lose either of you. Either you work together, or you find another job."

"Then I want a transfer," Dan blurted out.

Ramirez leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow at Dan's vehemence. "So, you finally learned what she is, huh? Finally learned about her gift?"

"Gift," Dan said derisively. "That's rich."

Well, he was right, there—it was more like a curse.

"Yes, gift," Ramirez insisted, giving Dan a hard stare. "Without it, you might be dead right now. I'll bet she and Fang have saved your butt more than once, haven't they?"

Dan shrugged, but wouldn't admit it.

"I'm sure you've helped her too. And that's exactly why you two need to stay together. You make a damned fine team . . . when you aren't acting like prima donnas, that is." When Dan and I didn't answer, Ramirez added, "You two have the potential to be the best team in the SCU. I can't afford to lose you to something this stupid. I need you. The *city* needs you. Bad."

I didn't know what to think, but Dan had no problem verbalizing his thoughts. "How can we work as a team when I can't trust her?"

"Has she let you down yet?" the lieutenant countered.

"Not as a partner."

That hurt. "What does that mean?" I snapped.

But Dan responded to Ramirez, not me. "I'm talking about her powers. I can't trust her to keep her lust to herself."

Fang glared at him. *THFPTTTTT*.

I had to agree with Fang's mental raspberry. What a pig-headed egotist. I laughed. "Don't flatter yourself, Sullivan. You're not irresistible." Not anymore.

Ramirez regarded Dan thoughtfully. "This isn't something she has control over, you know."

"No kidding. I found that out last night."

The lieutenant raised an eyebrow, as if he would have liked to ask how, but wisely chose not to go there. "But it does give her an edge. She's the best weapon we have to fight the vampires, and you're the best we've got to find out what's causing this and what they're up to." His voice hardened. "Now, are you going to hunker down and do your job or am I gonna have to kick your ass?"

Fang wagged his tail. NOW *THAT* I'D LIKE TO SEE.

I raised my hand. "I vote for—"

"Shut up," Ramirez said, cutting off my smart-aleck response. "You're no better. You wanted a chance to fight the vampires, wanted the ability to feed your demon with the lust of the hunt. I gave that to you . . . and now you want to cave because it got a little difficult?"

How did he know all that? "No—"

"Good. Then you're in."

Ramirez was right. I needed this job. Not only for the money, but for the outlet to keep Lola under control. If Dan couldn't handle it, that was *his* problem. "Yeah. I'm in."

Ramirez nodded, as if he'd expected nothing less, then swung his gaze to Dan's. "Sullivan?"

"I'll do it," Dan bit out. Left unspoken but hanging there in the air was what he left unsaid—he'd do it, but he wouldn't like it.

"Good. Now let me explain what we've learned." And as if nothing had ever happened, the lieutenant briefed us on what the other SCU members had experienced throughout the city as Dan and I took notes. Increased attacks on tourists, vampires traveling in small groups to do more damage, and lots of missing victims who turned up undead the next day. Ramirez was right—it did sound bad.

When he was done, Dan said, "I just have one last question." He sounded so belligerent that I had the feeling I wasn't going to like this.

"Shoot," the lieutenant said.

"How did you know about her demon? And why didn't you tell me?" He tried to keep his voice calm, but obvious anger seethed beneath the surface.

"I didn't tell you because it's Val's business, not yours."

Fang grunted. YOU GOT THAT RIGHT.

I'd wondered how he knew, myself. "Will you tell *me*?" I asked. "Privately?"

Ramirez nodded. "Sullivan, we're done here. You can wait outside."

"Gladly," Dan gritted and left.

Once Dan was out the door and out of hearing range, I asked, "How did you know so much about me?"

Ramirez hesitated, then said, "My informant told me about you, encouraged me to seek you out in fact. But you crossed my threshold before I could find you."

So that's why the lieutenant had recruited me so quickly. I'd wondered. "Who is it? Who knows that much about me?" When he hesitated, I said, "Please, I have to know." Was this person discreet . . . or would the whole world soon know what I was?

Ramirez answered my unasked question. "Don't worry—your secret is safe."

"Is it?" I asked doubtfully. "How do I know that? How do *you* know that?"

He sighed. "I'm not sure if you're ready to hear this yet, but my informant isn't anonymous. He's the leader of the demon underground."

The *what?*

The lieutenant nodded as if he'd heard my stunned question. "Yes, San Antonio has a demon underground. You're not the only one in town, you know."

"I know, but . . . there are more?" More people like Micah and me?

"Yes . . . more than you'd think."

"So how did he know about me?"

"He makes it his business to follow the lives of every person with demon blood, to help where he can, offer assistance when it's needed. If you ever need it, he'll be there for you, too."

Sounded like this mysterious leader had already helped me out at least once. "Lucas Blackburn . . . The leader sent Lucas Blackburn to my parents, didn't he?"

"You could say that."

I relaxed a little. "But . . . how do you know all this?" A suspicion bloomed in my mind. "Are you one of them? Are you . . . part demon, too?"

Fang nudged me. NO, I'D KNOW IF HE WAS.

Ramirez shook his head and said softly, "No, I'm not . . . but my wife is."

I stared at him, open-mouthed.

He smiled ruefully. "I don't have to tell you this is confidential . . ."

"Of course," I assured him. Stunned by the secret he'd just placed in my care, I vowed to do everything in my power to keep his trust.

That was the easy part. Now for the hard part—trying to find a way to work with Dan that wouldn't make me feel like a monster . . . and wouldn't engage the monster within me.

I found Dan in the parking lot. He kept his body distant and his face hard. But I was so over it already. The anger had drained out of me and now all I felt was sad. Sad that it had come to this, that any potential we might have had as trusted partners—of any kind—was now gone.

Dan ran a hand over his face. "We need to talk about what we're going to do next."

"Okay, where?"

He hesitated for a moment, obviously trying to think of a place that would be private enough not to be overheard, but not intimate. "How about your place?"

"Okay. See you there."

Luckily, Gwen wasn't home. Dan pointedly took a chair on the opposite side of the living room from me, and Fang just as pointedly parked himself between us and eyed Dan with an odd expression that was definitely undog-like.

"What exactly is a part-hellhound dog?" Dan asked uneasily, looking at Fang as if he thought the cute little mutt was as much of a monster as I was.

I shrugged. "Fang's abilities seem to lie primarily in the area of sniffing out vampires, demons, and other unworldly creatures."

I'M THINKING OF ADDING EMASCULATING STUPID COPS TO MY TALENTS.

"So why is he looking at me like that?"

I decided not to relay Fang's threat to Dan's genitals. "He's also very intelligent."

"What does that mean?" Dan asked, looking a little offended.

I sighed. "He understands English, and though he can't speak it, he can communicate telepathically. With me, anyway."

Dan glanced down at Fang, whose jaw had dropped open in what looked like canine amusement. "You understand me?" Dan asked skeptically.

NO, DUH. Fang rolled his eyes then deliberately nodded.

Dan looked taken aback. "Do I smell like vampire to you?"

Fang shook his head.

"Then why are you staring at me?" he asked the dog.

BECAUSE I'M HUNGRY AND YOU LOOK LIKE LUNCH.

I snorted. "What do you expect him to do, spell out an answer on the rug? You'll either have to trust me to translate or limit your questions to those he can answer with actions. He doesn't have any vocal cords. If he was in demon-hunting mode, you'd know it—his eyes flash purple, too. But I think the reason he's staring at you is because you've been so hostile and he wants to make sure you're not going to hurt me."

YOU GOT IT, BABE.

Fang let loose with a yip and a glare that left Dan in no doubt that the hellhound was agreeing with me.

"Me hurt *you*? That's rich."

Tired of this whole Val-is-a-monster thing, I said, "Are we done with the insults? Can we get to work now?" Focusing on work would be the best all the way around. Maybe then Dan would forget what I was . . . and I would forget he thought of me as something less than human.

"Okay," he said grudgingly, though he didn't apologize. "What's next?"

"You still think Alejandro is the culprit, don't you?"

Dan nodded. "Things got worse just as his movement started growing. I don't see how that could be a coincidence. We can't overlook the fact that he might be responsible for the increased activity. Let's talk to him again, see if we can learn any more."

"Yeah, before my parents barge in and do something stupid." I paused, remembering. "I'd also like to find out where Jen is staying, if I can."

"Well, I did some research on him earlier to see if I could get a home address."

"And?"

"No luck. His blood banks are all in the name of the New Blood Movement and he's not listed as officer or board member on state's corporate records. It's hard to find out more information without knowing his last name. Alejandro is a common name here in San Antonio." And before I could ask, Dan added, "I checked under Lily's name, too. Nothing's changed since she was . . . turned."

"Could she still be living in the same place she was when you were dating?" I asked.

"No—she left and someone else has already moved in. But she hasn't registered a change of address anywhere that I could find."

I nodded slowly. "And we don't know the last names of any of his other people. Wonder if they do that on purpose?"

"Probably. Most cults try to get people to submerge your identity in theirs."

That was an odd thought. "This isn't really a cult, is it?"

"Not yet . . . but you want to bet it won't turn into one?"

"Yeah, I guess it could, even if Alejandro doesn't want it to. So what do we do now?"

Dan shrugged. "We investigate, see what leads we can find, see if we can find a connection between the three vamps who attacked us and the Movement."

I nodded. "Makes sense. How?"

"See what the word is on the streets."

"Ask the gangs, you mean?"

"No, I don't think they'd know much about this. I mean we should ask the bloodsuckers themselves. Find a couple and question them."

Fang perked up. NOW YOU'RE TALKING.

Dan continued, "It'll be dark soon. Let's catch a bite to eat, then catch them before they can get a bite."

GROAN.

I agreed with Fang, but at least Dan seemed to be trying to overcome his prejudices. "You make it sound so easy."

"Hey, how can I lose with a hellhound and a demon vampire Slayer by my side?"

He kept his tone light, but there was an undercurrent to it, as if he resented having to rely on us for help. "All right, let's hunt down some vamps."

Try Me

CHAPTER TWELVE

Dan rose to his feet. "So, dinner first, then where? The blood bank to check on your sister? Or would you rather go hunting first?"

I thought for a moment. From all indications, Jen didn't seem to be in immediate danger. "Hunting."

According to Dan's notes, the River Walk was attracting more vampires lately, so we decided to go there first. Dan went to pick up the SCU truck, but I decided to drive the Valkyrie and meet him at a restaurant. We both needed some space.

We walked down the stone steps to the river. During the day, it was a lot more colorful. The beautiful jade green river was lined with dozens of tables topped with brightly colored umbrellas, bustling with tourists. We chose to eat outside at a restaurant on the water so Fang could join us. He wasn't too pleased at having to be on a leash, but it was required at the River Walk.

Conversation was sparse since we couldn't talk about our job in public and we didn't have much else to say to each other. By the time we finished eating, the sun was down.

It was never really dark in this area of the River Walk, though, not with the twinkling fairy lights in the trees and the busy restaurants and hotels along the river. Two groups of partiers floated by on red dinner barges, barely passing each other on the narrow river and adding a brief burst of laughter and gaiety to the evening.

It reminded me that this was what we were trying to preserve—the right for people to live their lives and enjoy themselves without worrying about the dark things that lurked in hiding. It wasn't all about combating the lust inside me or killing vamps. I needed to remember that.

Dan flipped through the notes he'd taken in the lieutenant's office. "It looks like most of the sightings have been downstream. Start there?"

I nodded. That's where I'd killed the vampire the night I'd found Fang.

After we paid and left, we headed past the touristy area, down to the darker side of the River Walk, strolling the flagstone path like any other normal couple. That was, any other normal couple who kept two feet of distance and a small hellhound between them.

I hated the fact that it was necessary, but knew it was the wise thing to do. So far, my anger at Dan had kept Lola at bay, but I couldn't count on it to continue. A little vampire action tonight would help take care of her.

As if my wish had made it so, Fang suddenly paused and sniffed the air. With that telltale purple eye flash, he growled and sprang into action, jerking the leash out of my hand and bolting toward the embankment.

VAMPIRE! he told me, unnecessarily.

Dan ran after him with me close behind, my demon blood sizzling with the anticipation of action. Dan leapt over something, but I didn't notice in time and tripped. As I went sprawling, I had one moment to feel grateful that the large soft thing had kept me from scraping my hands or face on the ground, then realized the thing I'd landed on was a body. A warm, unmoving one.

In horror, I scrambled off it. No, not it. *Her*. I'd seen plenty of dead vamps in my short life, but humans . . . that was something else entirely. I froze for a moment. This wasn't something I'd had to deal with before.

Dan and Fang rushed on ahead, and I chastised myself. *You're a professional, a slayer. You know what to do.*

Yes—I had to see if the woman was still alive. I knelt down to feel the pulse at the side of her neck. Unfortunately, there was no pulse, only a pair of neat punctures, oozing sticky wet blood. Poor woman.

Dan and Fang came back, a little slower than they'd left. *Lose the scent?* I asked Fang, wiping the blood off on my jeans.

YEAH. HE MUST HAVE TAKEN TO THE TREES OR ROOFTOPS, 'CAUSE THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT ON THE GROUND.

"Lost him," Dan said. He glanced down at the woman I'd tripped over then at me. "Don't you know better than to contaminate a crime scene?"

"Very funny," I snapped. "I'm sure the dead woman appreciates your humor." And dead very recently, too, if the warmth of her body was any indication.

Fang thoroughly sniffed the body. He'd know that vampire's scent again if he encountered it.

Dan removed the dead woman's wallet from her purse then called Ramirez on his cell, advising him to get a team down there ASAP, before any tourists took a stroll this way. "The victim is a Caucasian female, name Lorena Kott, with a Louisiana driver's license," he told Ramirez. "She's probably a tourist." He pulled out one of her business cards. "Says she's a molecular virologist."

I gazed down at her with regret. It wasn't often I actually *saw* the victims. "She looks like a nice woman. I wonder what she was doing on this part of the River Walk by herself?"

"Oh my God, Lorena," a woman exclaimed from the sidewalk behind us. She stared at the body in horror and hurried over.

Dan and I spent the next twenty minutes trying to calm the hysterical woman, and I was grateful when the team arrived and took over. This had to stop. I never wanted to have to do this for some poor person's loved ones ever again. What if it had been Jen? The thought made my blood run cold, making me even more determined to learn as much as I could.

After the team took over, Dan and I were free to do some more hunting. Unfortunately, with all the sirens and flashing lights, I figured any vamp would be long gone by now.

Ramirez was right—the vamps were getting bolder, getting closer to crowded areas, which was so unlike them. "Let's go somewhere else," I suggested.

Dan agreed and we headed out toward the seedy west side of town where there had been increased vampiric activity, me on my motorcycle with Dan following in the truck. But as we passed HemisFair Park with its distinctive Tower of the Americas silhouette, Fang suddenly nudged me with his nose, hard. I glanced back and saw he was snarling, his fur hackled.

I SMELL VAMP. TAKE A RIGHT.

I did as he asked and thrust an arm in that direction to let Dan know where I was going.

The hellhound directed me through the park, finally saying, STOP HERE.

I had barely come to a skidding halt when Fang leapt off the motorcycle and took off for the trees, still wearing his goggles. Taking a moment to shove down the kickstand, I ran after him, figuring Dan was close behind.

As the demon leapt joyfully into play, I ran as silently as I could so as not to alert the vamp. No, make that *vamps*, plural, I realized as I suddenly came upon two of them in a clearing.

A boy about Jen's age lay on the ground, and two male vamps tugged a girl between them like a wishbone they were about to pull apart. The girl was making helpless whimpering noises as the boys, who didn't appear to look any older than their victims, fought over her.

"Stop," I yelled. *You, too, Fang. We need info.*

Fang halted, and the vamps turned toward us. They howled with laughter, then the redheaded one on the right said, "What? Or your ferocious four-eyed dog will attack us? Ooooh, I'm so scared."

The other snarled, trying to look bad-ass and failing as he said in a dramatic voice, "You have no idea what you're dealing with."

Fang snorted. ARE WE IN THE MIDDLE OF A BAD B MOVIE, OR WHAT? WHAT ARE THEY, TWELVE?

Luckily for me, the redhead made the mistake of trying to control my mind. He must have been very newly made, because as soon as he connected I was able to learn exactly what kind of person I was dealing with. "Oh, really?" I whipped two stakes out of my back holster and spun them like an old-time gunslinger, letting them come to rest with the sharp ends pointed toward their hearts. "Care to bet on that, Billy? Or you, James?"

I grinned—I'd been practicing that move for awhile and had finally gotten the hang of it.

They cast uncertain looks at me, obviously wondering how I knew their names. "Who are you?" Billy, the skinny redhead, asked.

"Ever heard of the Slayer?" I might as well get some use out of the stupid nickname.

"Ye-es," James, the more solidly built blond, admitted.

"Then you know what I do to creatures like you who hurt people. Let go of the girl." I took a menacing step forward, wondering where the heck Dan was.

The vamps snarled, still not understanding the danger, still thinking they were immortal. "Make me," Billy said mockingly.

I heard a twang and a swish, and Billy was suddenly pinned to a tree by a quivering quarrel bolt. As the vamp screamed, I glanced aside to see Dan just stepping out of the shadows, reloading his crossbow.

Fang woofed. GOOD SHOT.

"Nice toy," I said admiringly. So that's what had delayed him.

"Nicer than you think," he said, aiming at James. "The bolts are coated in silver."

No wonder Billy was still screaming . . . and unable to pull himself loose.

"Let go of the girl," Dan called to James. "Or the next one goes in your throat."

James didn't even try to resist and was too dumb to think of using the girl as a shield. He dropped her, and she crawled toward the boy on the ground, sobbing.

James backed away, his hands up as Fang advanced with a menacing growl.

LET ME TAKE JUST ONE LITTLE BITE, PLEASE.

Not yet. Let's see what else we can find out, first.

"Don't shoot," James begged. "We weren't going to hurt her—we were just gonna have a taste."

Billy stopped screaming long enough to gasp out his agreement.

"Like you did to that boy on the ground?" Dan asked, his voice hard.

"He's not dead—just fainted," James said. "Ask her."

The girl, who had been frantically pawing at the boy, finally spoke. "He's alive, but no thanks to *them*." If her eyes had been weapons, James and Billy would have been slain on the spot.

They were telling the truth. "They're newly undead," I told Dan, holding one hand in staking position as I approached James.

The vamp stared at me from fear-filled eyes, his mouth wide with shock as he backed as far as he could. When his back came up against a tree and he could go no farther, Fang growled.

WHAT A WIMP. A DISGRACE TO VAMPIRES EVERYWHERE.

I stifled a smile. Fang had his fierce gaze on James's crotch, like a child eyeing a Christmas package he couldn't wait to unwrap. "Good boy," I said. "If he moves, eat the dangly bits first."

James visibly gulped and lowered his hands to shield his bits, which had probably shriveled by now. "How . . . how do you know when we were made?"

"I know because I'm the Slayer," I said and gave him a cold smile. "Go ahead, try to control my mind."

The idiot did, and at the first probe of his mind, he opened up a connection between us that I now owned—I could read his every thought. "Ask your questions," I told Dan.

"When were you turned?" he asked.

"Last . . . last week," James said.

"Who turned you?"

"I-I don't know. It was one of those initiation things. Everyone was masked."

Dan shook his head like he didn't believe it, but I said, "He's telling the truth. So far." But this was the first I'd heard of someone being turned by a group.

"Who do you work for?" Dan persisted.

"No-no one," James gasped out.

"Then why are you working together?" Dan demanded. "Most vamps work alone."

"We're best friends, we always do everything together." James glanced tearfully at his friend who was still pinned to the tree. "Why did you do that to him?"

Fang took a step closer as Dan menaced James with the crossbow. "You should be more worried about what we're going to do to you if you don't answer my questions."

The vamp didn't seem able to decide which threat was more dangerous—Fang or Dan. "What? Ask me anything, just let him go."

For the next twenty minutes, Dan grilled James. We learned that he and his friend had contacted the vamps themselves, thinking that becoming undead would solve all their problems. But James didn't know who had "initiated" them, didn't know anything about the three who had attacked us, and didn't have a clue who was behind the sudden rash

of new vampires springing up around San Antonio. The only order their initiators had given them was to avoid the New Blood Movement and the blood banks at all costs.

"He's telling the truth," I confirmed

"How many people have you killed?" Dan asked, his voice hard.

"None, I swear it," James said as his friend sobbed out a denial. "We'd never do that—we only take a little. But we have to have blood somehow or we'll die."

Dan glanced at me. I said, "James is being a good little vampire and telling the truth." I backed off a little when I realized that. These idiots had gotten in way over their heads. But it wasn't like they could suddenly change their minds and decide they didn't want to be undead after all.

"Are you going to let us live?" James asked, hope dawning on his face.

"Why should we?" Dan asked harshly.

I moved closer to Dan, and said softly, "They haven't killed anyone. Maybe we should let them go."

Dan scowled. "But they have terrorized people. And we don't have holding cells for vamps."

"Yes, but we can't just kill them." Not when they were helpless. When he continued to frown, I added softly, "They remind me of Jen. It's the kind of stupid mistake she'd make . . . that she might still make. Remember what Alejandro said—not all vamps are evil. They become more of what they were when they were alive." After touching the minds of these fledgling vamps, I believed that. "Maybe you can scare them into staying on the straight and narrow."

Dan relaxed a little. "Okay, you have a point."

I relaxed muscles I hadn't realized I'd tightened and Fang sighed mentally. WELL, SHOOT. I WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THOSE DANGLY BITS.

Dan glanced at the terrified baby vamps and raised his voice. "You're lucky. My partner is feeling charitable today and wants to let you live."

"We won't do it again, I swear," Billy said.

"Will you join the New Blood Movement?" Dan asked. "Take blood only from those willing to give it?"

I listened carefully to James's mind to see what that meant to him. All I got was fear.

"But they told us to stay away from the blood banks," James protested.

"Or what?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"What did your sires say would happen if you went there?"

"Sires? You mean our fathers?"

I rolled my eyes. These clueless guys knew absolutely nothing about the culture they'd joined. "Your sire is the vampire who turned you. What did yours say would happen if you went to the New Blood Movement?"

James seemed genuinely puzzled. "Nothing—they just said not to go there."

Dan looked incredulous. "They made you, said don't go to the blood banks, then let you trot off without guidance or supervision?"

"Yeah, I guess." James glanced back and forth between Dan and me as if wondering what it signified.

"Doesn't that seem strange to you?" Dan asked.

"Uh . . . yes?" He said it as if asking Dan if he were giving the right answer.

I sighed. "Trust me, it's odd. I doubt they are tracking you or even have a clue what you're doing."

"Right," Dan grated. "But I can guarantee you one thing. If we ever hear either one of you have attacked another person again, we will personally hunt you down, stake you on a sheet of silver, and feed you to the sun. Have you got that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" James snapped as smartly as any military recruit. Billy nodded. .

"Good—use the blood banks. That's what they're for."

Dan removed the bolt from Billy's shoulder. The vamps sped off into the darkness, terrified out of their minds. Good. Maybe this incident had knocked some sense into their heads.

THEY MUST BE GETTING DESPERATE FOR SOMEONE TO TURN, Fang said, his tongue lolling out as he looked very pleased with himself.

As well he should. *Thanks for sniffing those two out for us.*

MY PLEASURE. WHEN I SMELLED THE HUMANS, TOO, I KNEW SOMEONE HAD TO BE IN TROUBLE.

Oh, yeah, the humans. I glanced around, but the two victims had vanished, apparently having made good their escape while their attackers were distracted.

"So, lust demons are lie detectors, too?" Dan asked as he carefully disarmed the crossbow.

I shrugged and answered him warily. "Not really. But if they try to control my mind, I can read theirs. That's what gives me an edge in a fight. And those two were so new, they couldn't hide anything."

"Nice ability. Any reason why you didn't tell me earlier?" He sounded a little miffed.

"Because then I would have had to reveal my true nature . . . and look how well *that* turned out."

"Anything else I should know about you?"

"Let's see," I said mockingly. "Lust, reading minds, inhuman speed, super hearing, fast healing . . . Nope, that about covers it."

"Good."

"So glad you're satisfied. Now, let's talk about what we learned."

"Like what?" Dan asked. "Did you get more out of that than I did?"

"I shared everything I learned."

"Then all we know is that some mysterious vampires sired them and told them not to go near Alejandro's organization."

"Yeah. Kind of makes it look like he's in the clear. On this anyway."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Dan said. "Kind of sounds like classic game theory—the quickest way to get humans on board with blood banks is to show them the alternative. People will be lining up to give blood in a nice civilized fashion once this gets out. He's probably getting desperate, too, since the news isn't picking this up."

"Or maybe someone else is trying to make him look guilty because they know that's what people would think."

"I doubt it."

"That remains to be seen."

Dan looked exasperated, but I could tell he wasn't entirely convinced by his own arguments. "Let's do it then. Let's find out."

"All right." Next stop—Alejandro's blood bank. And he'd better have some damned good answers.

#

I glared, exasperated, at the perky Brittany. "Yes, I understand Alejandro isn't here, but can you tell us where he is?" This was the third blood bank we'd visited, with no luck.

"No, I'm sorry, I don't know," Brittany said, apparently determined to be cheerful despite my annoyance.

"What about one of his assistants? Like Lily or Austin?" What were the names of the other two? Oh, yeah. "Or Rosa, Luis."

"They're not here, either."

"Look," Dan said. "You know we were here before and met with Alejandro and the others. Can you get a message to him, letting him know we'd like to talk to him?"

A frown marred her pretty face. "I-I can't. I don't know how to get in touch with him. It's a secret."

Dan and I exchanged glances. *A secret?* "Why?"

Brittany glanced around the full waiting room nervously. I checked to see if anyone was watching, and saw one guy in the waiting area who looked interested in our conversation. Blond and good-looking, he appeared familiar, but I couldn't place him.

Brittany must have noticed him, too, for she lowered her voice and leaned forward to confide, "Alejandro has to be more careful. There's been . . . trouble lately."

"What kind of trouble?" Dan asked in a voice equally as low.

"Some of the other vampires are resisting the Movement. They've been attacking people outside the blood banks, especially when Alejandro is there. So, he's had to lay low for awhile."

I nodded. That tracked with what had happened to us the last time we were here.

"Do you have Alejandro's home address?" Dan asked.

Brittany looked shocked at the suggestion. "He doesn't give that out to anyone."

"How about his cell phone number?" Dan persisted. "I know he has one."

"Maybe, but I don't have it."

Looking as exasperated as I felt, Dan asked, "Then how do you get in touch with him if something goes wrong?"

"I don't. I contact the manager and he gets in touch with Alejandro."

"Okay," Dan said patiently. "Can we talk with your manager?"

Brittany waved an arm at the full waiting room. "You'll have to wait in line. He has a lot of people waiting to see him."

"Never mind," Dan said and gave Brittany our cell phone numbers in case she saw Alejandro. "Thanks for your help."

As Dan pulled me away, I asked, "Why didn't you wait? Or flash your badge or something?"

"The manager's a vamp—he won't be any more forthcoming."

True.

Though we had kept our voices low, that blond guy was still watching us. I nodded toward him. "Do you know who that guy is—the blond, in the blue shirt? He's been watching us. I recognize him, but can't place him."

Dan glanced in that direction. "No, but I recognized someone else in the last blood bank we visited."

"Who?"

"A waitress from Micah's club."

I glanced at the blond again. Take off his shirt and add devil horns . . . "That's it. He's a bartender at Purgatory." We exchanged glances. "Think it's a coincidence?"

Dan shook his head. "I don't believe in coincidences, not when it comes to police work. We're not getting anywhere in finding Alejandro. Let's check it out."

I reluctantly agreed to visit Micah's club. Though I wouldn't mind seeing him again, I wished it wasn't under these circumstances. I didn't trust Dan not to bully him. So, when we got there, I said, "Let me do the talking, okay?"

Dan raised an eyebrow. "Why? Because he's your cousin?"

"Yeah." Sort of. "And you don't have a great track record in dealing with those who are . . . different."

Dan looked as if he would have liked to respond to that, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

We approached the door of the club and Fang followed.

I'M TIRED OF WAITING OUTSIDE.

They may not let you in.

DOESN'T HURT TO TRY.

To my surprise, the Bela Lugosi doorman we'd met before glanced at Fang but made no objections as he ushered us in through the back way to Micah's office.

Micah was between sets, doing some paperwork, when we walked in. Fang ran over and greeted him like a long-lost friend, and Micah responded in kind.

"That's Fang," I said with a laugh. "We must smell alike or something. I've never seen him do that to anyone else."

I LIKE HIM, Fang said, sounding a little guilty. What did he have to feel guilty about? He could like who he wanted.

Micah smiled and rose to give me a hug. "It's good to see you again."

I returned his embrace. It felt good to just be held by someone who didn't judge me, didn't want something from me. I released him reluctantly, and we all seated ourselves, Fang surprisingly crawling into Micah's lap.

But before I could say anything, a woman stuck her head in the door. Slight, with an elfin face and exotically slanted eyes, she looked like a pixie. "I have some info for the scuzz—" She broke off as she spotted us in the room. "For that, uh scuzzball."

Micah frowned at her. "Thank you, Tessa. I'll get it later." Tessa nodded and withdrew, and Micah said, "Sorry about that. What can I do for you?"

I squirmed a little. "I'm afraid this isn't a social call. We have some questions for you."

Micah glanced toward Dan, then questioned me with his eyes.

"He knows," I said simply.

"Knows what?"

Dan answered. "I know what you both are—incubus, succubus, the whole demon thing." His tone was bland, but that didn't fool me. He sounded too casual, as if contempt was seething just below the surface.

Micah's raised eyebrow showed that he must have sensed it as well. "I take it the revelation didn't go well."

I pursed my lips. "You could say that." I turned to Dan. "Maybe it would be better if you let me talk to him alone."

"Forget it."

"But I'll share everything I get," I promised.

"Then there should be no problem in letting me hear it first-hand." Dan shook his head. "What's the problem, Val? You trying to protect your cousin and his demon friends?"

"What makes you think he needs protection . . . or even *has* demon friends?" I asked in exasperation.

Dan just shook his head, as if my question was too dumb to answer. Okay, maybe it was. I didn't know if Micah actually had any demon friends, but if he did, I planned to keep Dan out of it. I slanted an apologetic look at Micah.

"It's okay," Micah said as he continued petting Fang. "What do you want to know?"

"There have been increased attacks by vampires recently, and we're trying to find out who's behind it. You've heard of Alejandro and his New Blood Movement?"

"Yes. But what does that have to do with me?"

"We saw some of your employees at the blood bank . . ." I trailed off, knowing it was a long shot.

"What my employees do on their day off is their own business. We don't regulate morals here."

Dan made a disbelieving sound. "Two employees, two different blood banks. Don't you think that's a hell of a coincidence?"

Micah shrugged, looking unconcerned. "Perhaps the atmosphere at Purgatory lends itself to my employees being more accepting of the supernatural."

"Perhaps," Dan said doubtfully. "Or maybe they accept it better because they're demons, too."

I scowled, not liking the way my partner was harassing my cousin, no matter how distant the relationship. I turned to Micah, prepared to apologize, but he didn't look angry. In fact, his expression was totally bland as he continued to pet Fang. The hellhound had a blissful look on his face from all the attention.

Hmm . . . odd. If Micah was part-demon like me—and he definitely was—then he should be used to dogs sensing his demon and shying away. Why had he assumed Fang was different? He hadn't been surprised when Fang jumped in his lap, and they seemed awfully cozy together. A sudden suspicion bloomed within me. "How do you know my dog? How did you know he was friendly?"

Both Micah and Fang froze, the picture of guilt. Then Micah relaxed. "You mentioned him last time I saw you. I figured if he didn't object to your nature, he wouldn't object to mine either."

"But I didn't mention him." I was certain of that.

Micah shrugged. "I must have heard about him somewhere, then."

Fang got down off his lap and came to lie at my feet, looking abject as only a dog could. I LOVE YOU BEST.

That wasn't the issue. Come to think of it, there were some other odd things, too. "And your employee Tessa. She started to say scuzzie, first, didn't she? Before she changed it to scuzzball. Scuzzie is what others call members of the SCU."

Dan narrowed his eyes at Micah, whose expression gave nothing away.

I followed through on that line of thought. "And Ramirez knew what I was, without me telling him. The only thing I can figure is that Ramirez got the information from his informant." I speared Micah with a look that dared him to lie to me. "Someone here at Purgatory is the informant, isn't he? And the leader of the demon underground?"

"The what?" Dan asked, looking surprised.

Well, shoot. I shouldn't have mentioned that in front of him. But I couldn't worry about that now as all my attention was focused on Micah.

He sighed. "You are persistent, aren't you? I should have expected that."

"Yes, you should have," I agreed. "But stop stalling and answer the question. Who is it?"

He stared at me for a moment, as if thinking. "I can't tell you. You don't need to know."

"Yes, I *do* need to know. He's Ramirez's informant. He probably has information we need. If he can help, you can't keep his identity a secret. We need him."

Micah sighed. "You're right." He paused, obviously reluctant to give up the secret, then finally relented. "The leader is . . . me."

For some reason, that shocked me. He seemed too young to be the leader of anything. "You? Why didn't you tell me?" Okay, I knew it was unreasonable to expect him to have told me his secrets, but I'd bared my soul to him, so I guess I expected he should have done the same. Irrationally, I felt left out.

"You didn't need to know yet. And Sullivan *sure* didn't." He shot Dan an annoyed glance.

"Sorry about that." I hadn't meant to reveal his secrets—especially since I hadn't known they existed.

"How did you find out about the underground in the first place?" Micah asked.

"Ramirez told me."

Dan looked startled, but that was one secret I'd keep to myself. If Ramirez wanted Dan to know about his wife, the lieutenant would tell him.

Sudden realization made me turn to Micah. "So that's what you meant when you said you've been helping me where you could. Ramirez said something similar. Did you get my job for me?"

"Not exactly. I told Ramirez what you were when it was clear you were being interviewed by the SCU, but it was Ramirez's decision to hire you."

"And Fang?" I demanded.

"Fang is a fairly new member of our organization," Micah admitted. "I sent him to meet you, but it was his decision to stay."

Fang nudged me with his nose, looking soulfully up at me. I CHOSE YOU, he assured me. LOVE YA, BABE.

Well, at least the dog was truly my friend. And apparently Micah was, too . . . secretly. How strange that he had done all that without my knowledge. "So you did help me." I didn't know whether to be grateful . . . or annoyed that I hadn't accomplished everything on my own since my newfound liberation.

"That's what the underground is for," Micah said with a wary glance at Dan.

"Don't worry," Dan growled. "I won't reveal your secrets."

Micah nodded, though he didn't look convinced. "We help other part-demons and magic users find jobs, network with others like themselves."

"Hide from the rest of the world," Dan said flatly.

"Live normal lives," Micah corrected him. "We just want to be like everyone else without having to worry about being persecuted for our differences."

"Why you?" I asked. "Why are you the leader?"

"My father was the former leader. He trained me to take his place and rescue others like you and me."

"So why didn't the two of you rescue me?" I asked, wondering why I had never had the comfort of knowing there were others like myself in the world. It would have helped so much

"We didn't need to. Your parents did that for you. No matter what you might think of them now, they helped you learn to deal with your powers, enter the mainstream. Do you know how many would envy you for the life you've led? You didn't need rescuing."

Intellectually, I understood, but emotionally, I wasn't quite there yet. I'd felt like a freak for so long, like a total outsider to that mainstream. He could have welcomed me in to a world where I belonged. Instead, he'd let me continue staying in that house, knowing what he knew, and not cluing me in. I felt a little abandoned, as if my best friend had just let me down.

Fang poked me with his nose. NO, I'M STILL HERE.

The fuzzy mutt did make me feel better. "Okay, but why are you an informant?" I asked Micah. "Why do you work for the SCU?"

Micah flicked another wary glance at Dan, but decided to answer. "The purpose of the underground is to help our kind become accepted in normal society. But there are those, like many vampires, who don't want to blend or live peacefully alongside everyone else. They make it worse for the rest of us, so between us, Ramirez and I try to keep the malcontents under control."

"How?"

Dan snorted. "Obviously, he has a network of spies everywhere. That's why we saw his two employees at the blood banks, and why Ramirez knows so much about what the vampires are doing."

"I wouldn't call them spies," Micah said. "Watchers, maybe. When we learn of something that endangers the city, we let the lieutenant know."

It all made sense now. And maybe he could help with the argument Dan and I had. "So is the New Blood Movement bad or good? Are they behind the increased vampire attacks on humans?"

Micah grimaced. "I wish I could answer that, but it remains to be seen. I've tried to get some people into their inner circle, but haven't had any success yet." He cocked his head, looking curious. "Why is this so important to you?"

"Because not only do we need to stop this sudden crime wave, but my sister has gotten mixed up with them." The light dawned. "Wait. DU . . . demon underground. Are you the one who sent me the text message about Jen?"

Micah nodded. "My people did, anyway. We've been keeping an eye on you and your family, so when it became clear that your sister was getting involved with the blood banks, I thought you ought to know."

"Thanks—I appreciate that." Another mystery solved. "But we need more information. Do you know where Alejandro lives? He must have some place where he goes to rest at dawn each day."

"I don't know offhand, but we have an extensive database on the activities of those we've been watching. It might be in there, but I don't have time to search for it right now. I have another show."

"Can I take a look?" Dan asked.

When Micah looked reluctant, I said, "He's really a whiz with a computer. And if Ramirez trusts him, maybe you could, too."

"I'll only search for information on Alejandro and his lieutenants—I won't touch anything else," Dan promised.

"I'll watch him, make sure of it," I added.

"Okay," Micah said, and turned toward the computer. He pulled up a program and turned it over to Dan, giving him a piercing look. "I'm trusting you on Val's word. Don't let us down."

"I won't," Dan said. "Word of a Sullivan. Trust me, it's good."

"Okay."

Micah left us alone with the computer, and Dan rubbed his hands together before settling them on the keys. "Now, to find Alejandro . . ."

Try Me

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After about half an hour of searching, Dan said, "Got it!"

"What?" I asked, peering over his shoulder at the computer.

"This record says one of Micah's . . . operatives followed Alejandro and his people one night to a house, and they stayed there all day and didn't come back out until moonrise."

"Great—that must be it, then. Where is it?"

He scribbled down the address. "It's in Alamo Heights."

"Oh, really? That's a pretty ritzy neighborhood."

"Yeah. No telling how many years he's had to accumulate money."

True—it could have been centuries for all we knew—vampires didn't age after they were turned.

Micah came back in then, wearing a brief Tarzan-type costume and looking like he'd just had a workout. It was one thing to see him perform on stage, but quite another to see him mostly naked and sweaty in his own office. Dan looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

Apparently sensing that, Micah slipped on a robe and asked, "Have any luck?"

"Yes, we did." Dan rose and stuck the address in his pocket. "Found his address in your system and we're going to check it out tonight. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Micah leaned casually against the doorframe, but his eyes were intense as he regarded Dan. "Anytime you need information—on anything to do with demons—" he flicked a glance at me "—just ask."

Real subtle. But Dan obviously didn't want to know anything else about Lola. He grimaced and said, "Thanks."

"Good luck," Micah called as we went out the door.

As we headed out toward the parking lot, Dan said, "Why don't we take the truck? It's less conspicuous."

He had a point. With Fang sitting on the back of my motorcycle in his goggles, we were more likely to draw attention than divert it.

YEAH, THAT'S 'CAUSE I'M SMOKIN'!

I suppressed a grin. And here I thought it'd be difficult to get Fang to wear those goggles

We arrived at the address and all three of us sat there for a moment or two, gaping at the mansion. Done in Spanish-Mediterranean style, it boasted three stories on at least five acres, dozens of rooms, and gated security.

TALK ABOUT CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

"Looks like there's room there for a whole nest of vampires," Dan said.

"Yeah . . . and a few humans as well." And it would be real attractive to Jennifer who always wanted more than our parents had been able to provide. I released my seat belt and gave Dan a doubtful glance. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

Dan consulted the paper in his pocket. "It's the address that was in Micah's database."

"How do we find out if it's Alejandro's hideout? Knock on the front door and ask if they have vampires living there?"

He gave me a wry glance. "How far do you think that will get us?"

"Probably not far."

"Yeah. Even though Alejandro invited us to ask questions, he probably wouldn't be happy we showed up at his house." Dan thought for a moment. "Well, we can either charge right in and see if we can find her, or do some reconnaissance, see if this is the right place and if Jennifer is even in there." He glanced at his watch. "We have about forty-five minutes until dawn. If there's any activity inside, it'll likely stop by then. If we want to learn anything, we'd better do it now."

"Okay," I said. "Let's take a look."

Fang growled and looked behind us. COMPANY, he warned.

A dark limo was approaching. We all crouched down in the seat to be less visible, but Dan watched out of the side view mirror.

"What's going on?" I whispered.

"They're entering numbers on a security box." After a moment, he said, "Okay, they've gone in. Let's check it out."

Dan peered at the box on a pole next to the gate. "It's a cipher lock."

I glanced down at Fang. "Were there vamps in the limo?"

He sniffed the air. NOT MUCH TO GO ON, BUT YEAH, SOME FOLKS OF THE UNDEAD PERSUASION WERE DEFINITELY IN THAT LIMO.

Okay, so we probably had the right place. I nodded at Dan.

Dan glanced up at the wrought iron fence where the *fleur de lis* designs on top came to a sharp point every six inches or so. "We can either try to make it over that, or wait for another car to come through. At this time of night, there might be more returning to the nest."

"You could," a man said from behind us. "Or you could use the code and get in that way."

I grabbed a stake and whirled toward the source of the voice, seeing Dan do the same. But Fang was wagging his tail as he ran over to greet the newcomer.

CHILL. HE'S A FRIEND.

Dan and I relaxed as the man, who stayed in the shadows, bent down to pet Fang. "Howya doing, pal?" He straightened, saying, "They call me Shade. Micah called me, asked me to come by and give you a message."

Shade stayed hidden, making it difficult to make out his features, especially since he was wearing a hood that obscured his face. But there was something odd about him, something not quite right. Since he came from Micah, he was probably some kind of demon. Best to let the guy retain his secrets and anonymity.

I put away my stake and Dan did the same. "What message?"

"I've been watching this place, and Micah said to tell you whatever you need to know. I figure you need the code—78209."

How original—it was the zip code here. "Is there a camera pick-up?"

"No, just voice for visitors to request admission."

"Thanks." I pulled a picture of Jen out of my back pocket. "Have you seen this girl go in there?"

Shade took the photo and pulled it into his darkness. "I've seen her, once or twice." He handed the photo back to me, never letting a glimpse of his skin show.

"Is she there now?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I can't be here twenty-four seven."

Damn. I wish there was some way to know for sure.

Dan asked, "How many vamps are in there?"

"It varies. Sometimes as few as eight, or as many as twenty. More sometimes when there's an event going on."

"Is one going on now?"

Shade turned toward the house as if searching out its secrets. "No, not enough lighted windows."

"Still, eight is too many," Dan said.

"You don't think Ramirez would authorize us to take an army in there?" I asked dryly.

"I doubt it. And to be completely legal, we need a search warrant." He turned toward the spy. "What can you tell us about the security at the house?"

"Not much, but I haven't seen any sentries patrolling the grounds. I guess they figure they don't need them."

True. How many people would be dumb enough to sneak into a nest of vampires with super-sensitive senses?

"What about electronic security systems?" Dan asked.

"I don't know. I just watch from afar, keep track of the comings and goings when the situation warrants. There hasn't been much activity tonight, though."

"Is Alejandro inside?" I asked.

"I think so. I haven't seen him leave, anyway."

Dan nodded. "Thanks—you've been a big help."

"You're welcome." And Shade, true to his name, slipped back into the darkness.

"So," I said. "Do we go in on foot or take the truck?"

"I'd rather not take the chance that anyone would see the truck. It might be out of place among their other vehicles—especially if they have more limos."

"Okay, on foot it is." I strode to the gate and keyed in the numbers Shade had given us. Just as promised, the gate opened, then closed silently behind us.

We kept to the wooded areas at the sides as we approached the house and crept up to one lighted window. We crouched down to peer in, but all I could see was the curtain covering it. Most of the windows on the ground floor were that way, except for one. It looked like a dining room and was empty of people. Made sense—vamps wouldn't have much use for a dining room.

I leaned over to whisper in Dan's ear, "I'll check out the second story."

He frowned at me. "Okay, but be careful."

There were several live oak trees along the side of the house, and I shimmied up one of them, then climbed out on a limb to check out the light in the second story. Yes, there were a couple of people inside, though I still couldn't see much through the sheer curtains. I gave Dan a thumb's-up and edged out a little more. But I was paying so much attention to the window that I wasn't paying attention to my feet. One foot slipped and I lost my balance for a moment.

Dan, looking alarmed, rose to catch me, but I grabbed a branch and regained my footing quickly.

Unfortunately, Dan was now clearly visible from the windows.

Fang yipped .WATCH OUT!

"Intruders," someone yelled.

Suddenly, the bottom window was thrust open and a vamp I'd never seen before flew out at Dan, smashing him against a tree.

Two more followed him out and as Fang tried to hamstring the one attacking Dan, Lola broke free with glee for the hunt. I jumped down to land on the other two, hoping we could fight free of these three before any more joined the fray.

Shoot, I hadn't thought to draw a stake before jumping and was too occupied with using my feet and fists to keep these two at bay to get one now. I caught a glimpse of two more vamps peering out the window. *Aw, crap.* We were in trouble now.

Fang, hurry, go get Shade. We need backup.

But before the hellhound could leave, a buzzer sounded and all of the vamps froze. Suddenly abandoning the fight, they dove back into the house through the window and hurriedly closed it.

"What the—" Dan's words were cut off as shutters slammed down on every window all over the house, completely obscuring the view inside.

WHOA. THAT WAS LUCKY.

No, that was damn. I gestured toward the first few pink rays of light. "The shutters cut off the light, and the buzzer must have warned them dawn was imminent. I guess they didn't want to get caught outside in the sunshine." Thank heavens. Lola seemed a little disappointed, but now that the threat was gone, I locked her down good and tight. Didn't want Dan getting all freaked out again.

Dan started to move but moaned.

Fang glanced up at him. THAT DOESN'T LOOK GOOD.

"What's wrong?" I asked, coming to take a closer look at him in the darkness. There was a dark stain on his shoulder, the same one he'd injured before. "Is that your blood?"

"I'm not sure . . ." But the pain in his voice indicated it probably was.

I peered closer and gasped. "There's a small branch piercing your shoulder. Hold on, let me help you."

Fang winced. OUCH. THAT'S GOTTA HURT.

I pulled Dan away. The pain must have been excruciating as the branch came out, but he didn't show it, though his whole body tensed around the pain.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get you to a hospital."

"Okay, but not Gwen's," he gritted out. "She'll worry."

Shaking my head, I helped him back to the truck.

#

The emergency room fixed him up, but the doctors said it would be days before he could use his right arm at all, weeks or months before physical therapy would bring it back to full use.

We had a short tussle about who exactly was going to drive the SCU truck back, but I won since Dan wasn't in any condition to drive.

Fang snorted. YA THINK?

Ignoring Fang, I concentrated on driving the truck, which was bigger than anything I'd driven before.

Dan slumped in his seat. "I can't believe I was so stupid," he muttered.

"How do you figure?"

"If I hadn't stood up in front of the window, they wouldn't have spotted me, and we wouldn't be in this mess."

"That was my fault. After all, you stood up to keep me from falling." Which was kind of sweet, come to think of it.

Dan grunted, but I couldn't tell if he was grunting yes or no..

Fant arched a doggie brow. SOMETIMES A GRUNT IS JUST A GRUNT. AND DOES IT REALLY MATTER? THE GUY'S IN PAIN, PROBABLY NOT THINKING STRAIGHT.

True, he'd refused to take any more medication until he got home.

When we got back to his townhouse, I followed him inside.

"No need to stay," he said, scowling.

"Someone needs to," I shot back. "You're right-handed, aren't you?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So you can't use your right hand or your right arm at all for several days—the doctor said so. You'll need help."

"I'll manage."

Fang belched. HE'S A BIG GUY, HE CAN HANDLE IT. HOW ABOUT YOU FEED YOUR FAITHFUL HELLHOUND INSTEAD?

That's right—in all the excitement, we hadn't eaten lately. I regarded Dan doubtfully. "Tell you what, I'll take Fang home and get him something to eat, then I'll be back to see how you're doing."

"That's not necessary—" Dan began, but I was already gone and out the door before he could object further.

I gave Fang some leftover pizza and decided to take the rest to Dan's. Fang flopped down on the bed and refused to leave the room, declining to help me play nursemaid. I hurried back to Dan's and didn't knock, not giving him a chance to turn me away. From the sounds of it, he was in the kitchen.

He didn't realize I was there yet so I watched as he got a can of Coke out of the refrigerator and tried to open it with his left hand. When it slipped away from him, he set it on the countertop and braced it against the refrigerator. But when he tried to pop the top, it shot across the slick side of the fridge like a greased pig.

He tried to grab it with his right hand, evidently forgetting his injury, and cursed in pain as the Coke spewed all over the kitchen floor.

Time to make my presence known. "I'll get that," I said and grabbed some paper towels.

"I can do it," he snapped.

"I'm sure." I glared up at him from my position on the floor. "But I can do it faster and easier. Stop playing macho man and go sit down in the living room. I'll bring you a Coke."

He glared at me, but stomped off anyway. I heated up the leftover pizza, put it on a couple of plates, and brought it in along with a fresh soda.

He regarded the pizza suspiciously. "What's that for?"

"Eating."

He flashed me a look of annoyance at my sarcastic tone, and I added, "The doctor said you'll need something on your stomach when you take the pain pill. Don't want you throwing up on top of everything else. Besides, we didn't get dinner and I'm hungry."

I took a piece and bit into it, then handed him his plate.

He took it, muttering, "You don't need to wait on me."

"Then who will?"

"No one. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, really? Then how do you plan to get dressed? Shave? Take a shower? Drive? Cook?"

"Okay, you've made your point. I'll find someone."

But obviously, it wasn't going to be his partner. No, he was too afraid of Lola breaking out and ravishing him or something. Idiot. His precious virtue was safe with me.

"Fine. As soon as they get here, I'll leave. Who will you call?"

"I don't know. Gwen maybe?"

"Oh, that'll be a lot of fun for her. But she's still at work now, you know."

"She'll help," he said stubbornly. "Or my mother will."

"Okay, but until then, you're stuck with me." I stared at him, shaking my head ruefully.

He swallowed a bite of pizza. "What?"

"Ramirez won't be pleased when he learns you're out of commission."

Dan took a slug of his drink. "Who says I'm out of commission?"

I gestured at his bandaged shoulder. "That says so."

"No, it doesn't. I'm supposed to be the brains in this partnership, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Well, I sure as hell don't think with my shoulder."

"What *do* you think with, then? 'Cause right now, it sure isn't your brain."

Before Dan could answer, the doorbell rang.

I answered it, surprised to see Shade, still looking all dark and mysterious beneath his hoodie. With gloved hands, he pulled his unusually deep hood around his face so I couldn't see inside. What was up with the guy? He glanced around, seeming a little nervous in the daylight. "Can I come in?"

I let him in and Dan grunted a greeting. Though I sat down and offered him a chair, Shade remained standing and spoke from the depths of his hood. "I saw your accident and reported it to Micah. He sent me to help."

"As what?" I asked. "My new partner? How are you at staking vamps?"

"No," Shade said. "I'm here to help your existing partner get back on his feet."

I grinned. "Here's the nursemaid you wanted, Dan."

Dan shot Shade a look that clearly said, "No way."

"Not exactly," Shade said, sounding unperturbed. He paused and turned his hood in my direction. "Is it true you're related to Micah?"

Yeah, but what did that have to do with anything? "Yes. At least, we think we're distant cousins since we both have the same . . . demon." Powers? Curse? I didn't know what else to call it.

Shade made a questioning gesture toward Dan.

I shrugged, figuring I knew his unspoken question. "Oh, him? You can trust him." After all, he'd kept my secret, even from his sister, even though he seemed annoyed by Lola

Shade hesitated, then said, "You know I'm . . . like you?"

"Part demon, you mean? I guessed it." His mysterious manner was kind of a giveaway, plus the fact that he knew Fang and Micah. "What kind of demon are you?"

"A shadow demon."

A what? "Sorry, I guess I haven't been doing my homework lately. What exactly is a shadow demon?"

In answer, Shade pushed back his hood. Everywhere there should have been skin, there was . . . something else. He looked like a faint hologram outlining the shape of a man. But the insides shifted and swirled with dark streamers of light in all shades of gray. Clothing concealed most of the turmoil, but his features were totally obscured by churning ribbons of light, making it impossible to read his expression. Or even see his face for that matter.

It was a little unnerving, and I expected at least a comment from Dan, but there was nothing. Maybe it was the drugs, or the mesmerizing movement, or maybe because Dan had been asked to believe too many impossible things before breakfast, but this didn't even seem to faze him.

The oddest thing was to hear a completely normal voice issue from that maelstrom. "Shadow demons can occupy more than one dimension. Since I'm part human, I exist mostly in this one, but still shift in and out of others as well."

Fascinating. I'd have to read up on his kind.

"How will that help us?" Dan asked.

"I can pull energies from other dimensions—healing energies—but only if you both agree."

Dan seemed torn and glanced at me doubtfully. I couldn't read his mind, but I could guess about what was going through his head. He had thoroughly rejected my demon. Would it be hypocritical of him to accept the help of Shade's?

"Do it," I told him. The situations were entirely different, and we couldn't afford the time for him to heal. "It's not any different than going to an alternative healer, is it?" At least, I hoped so. I had no idea what Shade could do.

"Okay," Dan said. "I'll do it."

That was a bit of a shocker. I'd expected a lot more argument out of him. But he probably hated feeling helpless, at my mercy. Yeah, that'd do it.

Shade's endlessly moving face was still unreadable. Must come in really useful when playing poker. "Do you agree, Val?" he asked.

Looking puzzled, Dan asked, "Why does she need to agree? It's me you're healing."

"Because to use this healing method, I must ground myself in a being of this world, one whose uninjured shoulder will not only act as a template to heal yours, but who will supply energy for the healing. As a partial demon herself with strong powers, Val is ideal."

"Will it hurt her?" Dan asked.

He'd managed to surprise me again. Did he really care? Then again, it must be that hero thing again—his protective instinct coming to the fore. Kind of made me wish I needed protecting.

Shade shook his head, and the energies coiled wildly where his face should have been. "Not at all. It will drain her of some vitality, but nothing that can't be repaired by a good night's sleep."

Kind of like what I had done to Dan. It seemed fitting to pay him back in this way. "Fair enough. Will it hurt you or Dan?"

"It won't hurt me," Shade assured us. "I am merely a conduit. However, the process of healing will be painful for the one being healed, and the act can be more . . . intimate than either of you might care for."

Dan looking suddenly suspicious. "What do you mean, intimate?"

Pain didn't bother him, but the thought of letting Lola sink her virtual tentacles into him again obviously did. Idiot. I wanted to yell at him to get over it already. I wasn't about to let that happen again. I'd locked it down so tight, it would take a crowbar to let Lola loose again around Dan.

Shade shrugged. "I mean simply that since I will be drawing upon Val's powers to heal you, you may learn more about each other than you really want to."

Dan looked relieved. "Okay. No secrets here."

I hesitated. Did I really want Dan knowing how I felt about him? Not that I *cared*, you know, but I didn't want him knowing how much his rejection had hurt. Then again, if I could keep Lola caged up, I guess I could keep that hidden, too. Besides, I needed him in good working condition. I couldn't take on a whole vein of vampires with no one but Fang for backup. I could do this—I'd just have to be very careful. "I'm in."

"Good." Shade moved toward Dan. "How many painkillers do you have in your system?"

"They gave me a shot at the hospital, but it's just about worn off, and I haven't taken any pills yet." He'd obviously been waiting for me to leave.

"Good. This will work better if your mind isn't clouded."

"What do I need to do?"

"Stay where you are." Shade beckoned to me as he moved around behind Dan and took off his gloves. "Come sit next to him on the couch so I can touch both your shoulders. We'll need to get the bandage off."

I sat next to Dan, then helped him remove the bandage. Once it was off, I glanced uncertainly at Shade, realizing I didn't know how my inner demon might react with his. Would it distract him? Offend him? "Um, when our energy fields overlap, my succubus—"

"No worries," Shade said. "Knowing where the lust comes from will help me handle it. Besides, once my power kicks in, all of you—including your demon—will be too occupied to do anything about it."

Shade had us face each other on the couch, then touched my shoulder. It was as if the shadow demon drew substance from me. He solidified, becoming real, human. Without the spooky special effects, he looked like a normal guy—a little older than me, maybe. He had long blond hair, blue eyes, and was totally gorgeous, but normal.

Shade glanced at Dan, and for the first time, I could read Shade's face—he looked concerned. "If this becomes too much, tell me and I'll stop."

Then he touched Dan's neck and I didn't care what he looked like. All I could care about were the strange . . . things going on inside me.

Now I knew what he meant about being totally occupied. Energy ebbed and flowed, from me into Dan, then back into me. There was no room for anything else, not even Lola—we were both just swept along by the tide. Whenever I surged into Dan, I obtained a small glimpse into his psyche, a private view of his world, his mind. As Shade had warned, it was incredibly intimate and I was learning a great deal about Dan, straight from the source where I knew only truth existed.

I obtained flashes of his past, learning about his pride in being a Sullivan and a protector, his strong love of family, his annoyance at losing Lily to the vampires, and his fear of Lola. But not the way I thought. He was having enough problems controlling his attraction to a girl he considered too young to have even had a life yet, and Lola made it a heck of a lot more difficult to stick with his good-guy code.

Really? That made me feel better.

In return, I could tell he was learning about me as well. Though I tried to snatch them back, my memories leaked out of me. My isolation as a child when I watched other children play in the street but couldn't join them. My mother's caring, but wariness of the demon child she'd spawned. My first kiss that almost proved fatal for Johnny. My training to control the lust, and my sorrow at being different and losing my family.

Worse, my constant battle to balance my need for people with the side of me that reached out for the kind of contact I might not be ready for. Dan learned his big scary lust demon was a great big virgin chicken.

When Dan veered too close to things I didn't want him to learn, I tensed, but it wasn't necessary.

Shade moved his hand to the wound on Dan's shoulder and I felt Dan's reaction as hot pain scalded him. There was no more give and take, there was only my power and strength flowing to Dan as Shade used it to reattach ligaments, repair torn muscle and regrow shredded skin tissue.

It took longer, much longer, to heal the damage than it had to create it, and was infinitely more painful for Dan as he felt every minute detail of the healing. I opened my eyes once to beg Shade to stop, to stop torturing Dan, but seeing the shadow demon flicker in and out of human form, seeing Dan stoically endure as his face tightened in a rictus of pain and his skin turned pale and pasty, I couldn't do it.

Finally, after eons of mind-numbing agony for Dan, it abruptly ceased as Shade removed his hands from both of us.

The relief was incredible, and though I felt exhausted, I leaned over to look at Dan's shoulder. "Ohmigod . . . it's completely healed."

"Yes." Shade paused in pulling on his jacket. "He was very strong and was able to endure until the end. I've never seen anyone tolerate that much pain for a wound that size." He settled the hood over his head once more and pulled on his gloves.

Yeah, that was Dan, all right. After being in his head, I could see everything he did was heroic.

"Thanks, man," Dan said hoarsely. "I owe you one."

Shade nodded, his expression enigmatic behind the hood and the flow of interdimensional energies. "You do. And someday, Micah will collect."

That sounded ominous. Dan raised an eyebrow, but didn't object.

Shade continued, "How many know of your wound?"

"Only Val, you, and the people in the ER."

"Then I suggest you don't end up in that ER again anytime soon. It would be difficult to explain your sudden healing."

"Don't worry. I plan to avoid the hospital at all costs."

Yeah. Two injuries in one week was more than enough for any guy, no matter how heroic. Especially in the same shoulder.

"You two rest," Shade suggested. "I can see myself out."

I felt too exhausted to move and Dan looked even worse than I felt. "I'm sorry," he said gruffly. "I didn't realize how much this would drain you."

I made a feeble motion with my fingers—all I could manage at the moment. "S'okay. I agreed."

"Yes, but . . . I used you, used your powers. Kind of like—"

Try Me

He broke off, but we were still connected in a way, so I suspected what he'd left unsaid. "Kind of like Lola used you?" I said softly.

"Yeah. But I saw . . . inside you . . . saw that you couldn't help it, that it was involuntary. I'm sorry for being such a jackass."

I nodded, the smallest possible movement of my head. "Apology accepted. We're even now."

Did that mean we could be friends again? I hoped so.

Try Me

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Though we both fell asleep on Dan's couch, I stumbled home to my own bed at some point, and woke to find Fang nosing me.

YOU GOING TO SLEEP ALL DAY? I'M HUNGRY.

I checked the clock. Nine hours had passed, and the sun had gone down again. I was beginning to feel like a vampire myself, what with sleeping during the day and working during the hours of darkness. Luckily, I didn't have a thirst for blood, just Coke. And, as Shade promised, I felt as if I had fully recovered my energy.

I got up and dressed, seeing that Gwen had left us some food. I fed myself and Fang and snuggled up on the couch with my Coke as I thought about the events of the night before.

Shade had been strange, yet fascinating, and he'd done wonders in healing Dan. Idly, I wondered if Shade had healed more than his shoulder. How else could I account for Dan's apology?

I relived the moment in my mind. Yes, I was certain he was sincere, especially after I'd touched the innermost part of him last night. He was an honorable man, so if he said he was sorry, then he really meant it.

Dan knocked on the door then, and I let him in. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

He stretched his shoulder experimentally, swinging it a few times. "Better than new. How about you? Did you get enough sleep?"

"Yes, I'm fine. What are the plans for today? Shall we try to find Alejandro at his home? Try the blood banks?"

Dan thought for a moment. "I'm not sure what the best approach is, especially after last night. Maybe—"

A low buzz interrupted him and he broke off and held up one finger as he took his cell phone out of his pocket. "Hello?" He raised an eyebrow. "Alejandro?"

I signaled to let me hear as well, and he tilted the phone slightly so I could hear both sides of the conversation. Luckily, my hearing was excellent.

"You have been trying to reach me?" Alejandro asked.

"Yes—"

"I understand the two of you had a slight altercation with some of my people last night."

"Us? What makes you say that?"

"One of my people recognized Ms. Shapiro and I deduced you must have been her companion in the altercation."

Dan rolled his eyes. "That unprovoked attack, you mean?"

"Oh, not unprovoked, surely," Alejandro corrected smoothly. "After all, you were on private property, uninvited, peering into windows like a schoolboy. No wonder we assumed you were an enemy."

Dan grimaced. Guess he didn't like being called a schoolboy. "And now? Do you still assume we are enemies?"

"Misguided perhaps, but not enemies." Before Dan could say anything more, Alejandro added, "My apologies. If I had known it was you, we would have invited you inside. Why didn't you just knock?"

I guess he was thrown off balance by the vampire leader's apology, because Dan said, "We didn't think we'd be welcome."

Alejandro paused. "That close to dawn . . . perhaps you were right to worry. There would be more danger of overreaction. But not now. Would you care to join me?"

"Join you where?" Dan asked warily.

"At the mansion. Come, and I will show you around, answer your questions. You know the address . . ."

Dan questioned me with his eyebrows. I shrugged. Why not? It couldn't hurt.

Dan accepted the invitation, but he called Ramirez and briefed him on what we were about to do, just in case.

When we arrived at Alejandro's mansion this time, we were admitted with gracious Old World charm by the leader of the New Blood Movement himself. He accepted Fang as a matter of course, though the hellhound bristled at so many vampires around, and Alejandro showed us through the beautiful mansion.

Being undead must pay pretty well, 'cause it was awesome, like the "after" pictures in those television decorating shows. He hadn't gone for the über modern look here. Instead, lots of tile, wood, and earthy colors, combined with stone and wrought iron accessories, made it very warm and inviting. Kind of like I imagined a villa in Spain might look.

The only place he didn't take us was the basement, and I assumed that was because they slept there during the day.

Unfortunately, I didn't see Jen anywhere, nor did Fang alert me to her presence. I didn't force the issue on the basement since Fang didn't seem interested in following his nose down there.

NO HUMANS GO THERE, he confirmed.

Once the amenities were over, Alejandro took us to his study. More warm tile here, with thick rugs and the obligatory masculine leather chair and desk. But it was the mural completely covering one wall that captured the attention. It showed a lush green hillside covered with wildflowers leading down to a turquoise sea. But what was most remarkable about the mural was how everything seemed drenched in sunlight. Probably the only daylight he ever saw.

Alejandro waved us to a pair of leather chairs and offered us refreshment. Not knowing what people who only drank blood might have on hand to munch on, I declined and Dan did as well.

As if by prearranged signal, Luis and Lily drifted in to take up stations on either side of their boss—an attractive pair of bookends leaning on either side of his throne-like chair.

"So," Alejandro said, folding his hands in his lap and looking the picture of the considerate host. "You wished to see me. How may I help you?"

Dan gestured at me to go ahead. Deciding not to offend Alejandro within his own home with accusations of murder and mayhem, I said, "I'm looking for my sister."

One eyebrow rose. "And you think I have her?"

"Yes. You, or one of your people."

"But as you requested, I gave orders that her employment was to be terminated."

Lily nodded. "It was. I told her to leave."

"But she didn't," I said patiently. "And you're paying her now."

Alejandro spread his hands as if in supplication. "If she will not go when asked, what do you expect us to do?"

"Maybe the *reason* she didn't quit is because she is enthralled by a vampire who won't let her."

"I find that hard to believe. That is forbidden in the organization."

"Oh, really," Dan said flatly as Luis and Lily exchanged enigmatic glances. "Then what do you call what you were doing to the audience the night of the rally, what you do to every person you meet?"

He shrugged. "I use my charisma to persuade, not to control. And that is what every member of my organization learns—they may use their power to sway men's minds to make giving blood more pleasurable, but may not use it to harm others or use them as slaves."

Lily and Luis exchanged another enigmatic glance.

What did that mean? They didn't seem to be as confident of Alejandro's assurances as he was. Perhaps the man didn't practice what he preached. Or maybe some members of the organization weren't as much under his control as he assumed.

"Maybe not everyone who works for you feels the same," I suggested.

A small spark of anger lit in Alejandro's eyes. "If so, I assure you I shall find the culprit and force him to release your sister. I will not be defied."

I wanted to believe him, but I couldn't, not when Jennifer was in danger. But, the big question was, if Alejandro didn't know she was enthralled and he actively opposed it, why would one of his underlings risk ticking off the boss? Did Jen know something that made controlling her a necessity?

Freeing her suddenly became even more imperative. "Do it soon," I said, my voice cold. "Or I'll find another way."

Luis spoke for the first time since coming in to the room. "How? If we are not able to make this determination, how can you?"

I rose, preparing to leave. "Simple. I'll just kill you one by one until I find her controller and Jennifer is released."

Lily let out a brief laugh.

Dan rose as well and glanced at her. "Val's not kidding. She'll do it."

Fang growled. AND I'LL HELP.

Lily's amusement faded and Alejandro cocked his head, looking mildly curious, but unsurprised. "Would you really?"

"Damn skippy," I said and left.

Fang followed me. OOH, PITHY. WORTHY OF A HELLHOUND.

Once we were out of the mansion and back in the truck, I glanced at Dan. "Did you really believe I would kill them all or were you just backing me up?" I wasn't sure which one I hoped he'd choose. One made me out to be a monster, and the other a liar.

He gave me a half smile. "I was in your head last night. I know how much your family means to you, even though they don't deserve it. You'd do anything to keep them safe." He paused, then added quietly, "I would, too, if it were my family."

Relief washed over me at the realization that Dan meant it. Wow, so this was what it felt like to be understood and accepted. I liked it.

"But I thought you were all gung-ho on proving Alejandro is one of the good guys," Dan added.

"I am. I still think he is. But I'm not so sure about his underlings. He may think he has them all under control, but, judging from their body language, Luis and Lily aren't as confident. How much you want to bet the lieutenants are having problems they're not telling Alejandro about?"

"No bet here."

I shrugged. "I figured a threat would help smoke out the real culprit. Any ideas on what we should do next?"

He paused, thinking. "We don't have any other leads in finding the source of the increased activity. Besides, whenever we look for your sister, trouble always seems to find us."

Fang snorted. HE HAS A POINT.

"True."

"Maybe I can take another look at Micah's records, see if I can find any reference to Jen."

"Good idea. I think I'll take another look at the blood banks, talk to some of her friends, check out her regular hangouts, and see if I can find her that way . . . or if Fang can sniff her out."

Since all three of us were in agreement, Dan dropped me off at the townhouses and headed once again to Purgatory.

I had no luck at her usual hangouts and no one seemed to know where she was, so I returned to Purgatory. Tessa, Micah's assistant, let me into his office.

Fang and I walked in just in time to hear Dan ask Micah, "Does it work on all women?"

"Does what work?" I asked behind him.

Dan turned around, surprised. "I was just asking Micah if his powers work on all women."

Tessa rolled her eyes. "If they have a pulse."

"Even other demons?" Dan persisted. "Even vampires?"

"Of course," Tessa said with an impatient wave of her hand. "What do you think *I* am?"

"You're a vampire?" he asked in disbelief.

"No, genius, I'm part demon."

Micah and I unsuccessfully tried to hide our smiles.

Fang danced a step. I LIKE HER.

Micah cocked an eyebrow at Tessa. "I'd like to give him a little demonstration of my powers, if you don't mind."

Tessa grimaced. "Is that necessary?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Okay, go ahead." She stiffened, as if preparing herself for battle.

Micah grinned. "First, tell him how it is to work for me."

She shrugged. "You're an okay boss. You pay well, you're not judgmental, and you don't chase me around the office."

Sounded like she had some history there.

"Thank you." Micah rose and took her hand, despite the apprehensive expression on her face. "Now for the demonstration."

I felt his incubus rouse and reach for Tessa. All of a sudden, her face relaxed into a goofy smile, and she stared adoringly at Micah.

Micah smiled down at her. "Now, tell him, Tessa, how it is to work for me."

She reached up to stroke his cheek with one hand and snake her other arm around his waist. "You're the *best*, the sexiest man alive. But you never chase me—"

"Now it ends," Micah said, releasing her hand and taking a step back.

His incubus flowed back into him, fully under his control. He made it seem effortless. I wished I could do that.

Tessa backed off, wiping her hand against her jeans. "I really hate it when you do that—it's demeaning."

Surprisingly, Micah didn't seem offended. "There will be a bonus in your next paycheck." He turned to Dan. "You see? She is only attracted to me when I am consciously using my power. When I am not, her mind and her feelings are her own."

Oookay. Real subtle there, Micah. Just what kind of discussion had he and Dan been having before I came in?

Tessa backed away, and Dan looked thoughtful as he glanced at me. "If it works even on vampires, then that's how you can find out if Alejandro is telling the truth—use your powers on him, Val."

"No way." Did he even realize he was asking me to do something he hated having done to him?

"Why not?" Dan persisted. "It will help you find your sister."

"If I do that, then I am no better than the vampire who has enthralled her mind."

"Not exactly. You'd be doing it to help free your sister, not enslave her."

Maybe. But it would also let Lola loose, and the last time that had happened, I'd enjoyed it way too much for my liking. I shook my head. "You of all people should know better."

Dan shrugged. "Maybe we'd better go."

We said our good-byes, then on the way out the door, I accidentally brushed against Tessa.

She grabbed my arm as her eyes flashed purple. Shutting them tight, she furrowed her brow in concentration. After a moment or two, she said, "To obtain what you most desire, you must accept what you most hate."

I pulled away. "What does that mean?" Had Micah been coaching her?

Tessa opened her eyes. "What did I say?"

I repeated it.

She frowned, muttering, "Why do I always have to sound like a stupid fortune cookie?"

Micah smiled. "The message sounds pretty obvious to me."

Did it? Well, I didn't get it.

"Thanks, guys," Tessa said. "It's been real." She seemed a little shaken, but tried to hide it with a casual wave of farewell as she left.

"That's Tessa's gift—prophecy," Micah said. "You're lucky. She rarely shares it with anyone outside the inner circle. But trite as her predictions may sound, Tessa is always right."

His phone rang then and Micah answered it. When he hung up, his look at me was part sad, part pitying.

Fear leapt through me, like a wildfire. "What is it? Has something happened to Jennifer?"

"Not your sister. Your stepfather."

"Something happened to Rick?"

"Yes. He's missing."

No, it couldn't be. I couldn't lose another one. And Rick had always treated me well—better than my mother sometimes. "What do you know?"

"That's all. I've had people watching your family, but he hasn't been seen since last night. Your mother seems worried."

And she hadn't called me? That hurt. I turned to Dan. "You coming?"

"You bet. Let's go."

#

Dan stopped the truck in front of my childhood home and turned off the engine. I hesitated, unsure if I really wanted to deal with my mother. Dan just waited, allowing me to gather my scattered thoughts, but Fang nosed me, looking anxious.

YOU OKAY, KIDDO?

I scratched his ears. "It's okay. I just need a moment." But no amount of time could prepare me for the scene I was sure I was about to endure. Sighing, I got out of the truck and headed for the front door. Dan and Fang followed but I didn't stop them. I'd take a cue from the cops and accept backup.

Boy, it felt weird to knock on the door I'd used so freely throughout my childhood.

Mom answered the door, looking hopeful. But when she saw me, her face fell. "Why are you here? Have you found Jen?"

Gee, way to make me feel welcome. "Can we come in?"

She waved us into the living room, looking a bit distracted. A small, ginger-colored cat wandered out, saw me, and bristled up to twice its size. Fang curled his lip, took one step forward and snarled. The cat took off like hell itself was nipping at its heels.

"You have a *cat* now?" I didn't mean to sound accusing, but Mom knew how animals reacted around me. Always before, she'd been careful to keep them away, to avoid hurting my feelings. What did it mean now that she had one in her house? Had she thought I'd never come here again? Or did she just not care?

I hadn't thought anything else Mom could do would hurt me, but for some reason, this did.

Mom looked slightly embarrassed. "Jennifer was always bugging me for a cat. I thought if I got her one, she might come back . . ."

"Uh-huh," I said doubtfully, though I had to admit I felt a little better for the explanation.

Mom made an impatient gesture. "Why are you here? Have you found Jen? Is she okay?"

"Not yet," I said soothingly. I'd never seen my mother look so fragile, so worried. "Why don't you sit down?"

"I don't want to sit down. I want my daughter back. You said you'd find her."

My daughter. The words were like a spike in my heart. Did Mom think of Jennifer as her *only* daughter now?

Fang nuzzled my leg. SHE DOESN'T DESERVE YOUR LOVE.

Fang was right. Every time I saw Mom, she killed a little more. But it was difficult to stop loving someone all at once, no matter how badly they treated you. And it was clear now that no amount of wanting would make Mom love me. I just had to accept it and move on with my life.

Something inside me hardened, walling away the hurt, forcing me to grow up a little. Taking a shaky breath, I said, "I'm doing what I can—"

"Well, it's not good enough. God only knows what those creatures are doing to her."

Dan stepped forward and opened his mouth, probably to defend me, but I stopped him with a look and an upraised hand. Mom was understandably upset, and I was willing to cut her some slack. "I *will* get her back," I promised.

"Then what are you doing here? Why aren't you out there looking for her?"

Couldn't I have just come to see my family, to be there for her, have her be there for me?

Apparently not. "Because I heard Rick is missing."

"Rick isn't missing. He's out there actively looking for his daughter, and he won't come home until he finds her."

That's what I'd feared. "Damn it, I told him not to. I told him I'd take care of it." Why couldn't he have trusted me?

"What do you expect? His little girl is gone. He had to do something."

I closed my eyes in disbelief. Rick was usually the smart one, not the macho type. Sure, I understood his reasoning, but why couldn't he have waited? I opened my eyes. "He hasn't called?"

Mom shook her head. "He won't until he finds Jen."

Maybe. Then again, maybe he couldn't. Rather than add to Mom's worries, I asked, "When did you last see him?"

Mom pushed her hair aside, looking extremely weary. "Last night. He went looking for Jen right after the store closed. But he hasn't been home. He's probably sleeping in his car or something."

She sounded more worried than she let on. "Do you know where he went?"

"A friend's daughter heard at school that Jen was working at a different vampire blood bank, had just moved from one to another."

"Did she say which one?" Dan asked, leaning forward.

"Yes—the one out by Fort Sam."

"Good," I said. "That gives us a place to start looking."

Mom raised her head, her expression apprehensive. "You don't think Rick is dead . . . or enthralled, do you?"

Either was possible, and I wasn't going to lie. "I don't know."

"Oh, God." Mom wrapped her arms around herself and whispered, "I can't lose him, too. I just can't." She turned a ravaged face to me. "I-I love him so much."

"I know," I said softly. "So do I." I'd heard horror stories about other stepfathers, but Rick had been nothing but kind to me. In fact, he supported me more than Mom had. I didn't want to lose that . . . or him.

"So you'll bring them back to me?" Mom persisted.

I wouldn't lie and make promises I might not be able to keep. "I'll try."

I *would* find Rick and Jen, one way or the other. I just hoped they were still alive and unharmed when I did.

"What about Val?" Dan asked, but there was steel beneath his deceptively quiet voice. "Aren't you worried about losing her, too?"

EXACTLY WHAT I WAS WONDERING.

It was nice to hear some people thought I was as important as Jen and Rick, but I wasn't certain I wanted to hear Mom's answer. I tugged on Dan's arm. "It's okay," I whispered. "You don't have to do this."

"Val can take care of herself," Mom said defensively. "Besides, it's her lifestyle that got us into this mess. It's her responsibility to clean it up."

Was she singing that old tune again? Okay, damn it. Mom had just reached the end of her allotted slack. I was tired of being the scapegoat for every problem in the family, tired of being the one who always tried to smooth things over. I couldn't make things okay anymore, couldn't buy my way back into the family by playing nice. It was time to give up old habits that didn't work. It was time to let go.

I released Dan's arm, giving him tacit permission to let loose.

He took it. "*Her* responsibility?" he repeated incredulously. "What about your responsibility as a mother? When did you abdicate that?"

"I didn't—"

"The hell you didn't," Dan bit out. "Val has done nothing but try to help you and you treat her like crap."

"I do not." But her protest was faint. Was that because Dan wasn't the kind of guy you argued with when he was so righteously angry . . . or because Mom knew he was right?

"Yes, you do," Dan insisted. "Not only have the lot of you continued doing idiotic things when she expressly warned you against them, but then you blame her for your own stupidity! You can't even trust her to do her job, the one thing you know she's damned good at. And what the hell happened to unconditional love?"

I'M BEGINNING TO LIKE THIS GUY.

My eyes stung. Damn, it felt good to have a champion for a change.

Mom seemed to crumple. "Val has always been the strong one. She never needed me as much as Jen did."

That's what she'd like to believe, but I knew better. However, I realized Mom needed a scapegoat and her eldest daughter was the chosen sacrifice. Maybe once all this was over, she'd be more sensible. But for now, there was no sense trying to reason with her. "Let's go," I said to Dan.

Dan and I turned toward the door. I just wanted to leave, get away from all this emotional bloodletting. Fang snarled at Mom, then followed.

As we exited, Dan turned around for one parting shot at Mom. "You're just damned lucky Val is decent enough to ignore the way you've treated her and help you anyway."

Mom just shook her head, looking sad, and closed the door.

I sighed. It was no more than I expected. But no matter what Mom thought, I was going to find her missing family members and bring them home . . . to the home where I suspected I'd never be welcome again.

Well, to hell with them. I'd just carve out a new life for myself—better than anything I had in the past. I deserved the kind of love and respect the Sullivans seemed to have for each other, and damn it, I was going to find it, no matter how long it took.

Try Me

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As we drove to the blood bank, the injustice of Mom's finger-pointing nagged at me until I was totally pissed. It woke the dormant Lola, and lust began to sizzle beneath the surface. I deliberately focused it away from Dan and into the anger fueling my quest for Jen and Rick.

When we arrived at the blood bank, I climbed out of the truck and slammed the door, not knowing or caring if Dan and Fang followed me. I shoved open the door to the building and glanced around. The place was full, but no Rick, no Jen. I stalked toward the desk and the young man sitting there. He paled when he saw my expression.

I glanced at his nametag. "Hello, Jerry." It came out as more of a threat than a greeting.

He gulped and scooted backward, out of range. Smart guy. "H-hi," he stammered.

"Is Jennifer Anderson here?" I didn't even try to soften my voice. I finally had a lead and I was going to follow it until I found Jen and Rick, or someone was going to pay.

"Not tonight."

Dan appeared by my side, along with Fang. Jerry glanced down at the terrier. "You can't bring dogs in here—"

Fang and I both snarled at him, and Jerry backed off even more. "Okay, okay. So long as he's good, I'll overlook it this time."

"When will Jennifer be here?" I demanded.

"Wh-why do you want to know?" He looked terrified as he glanced back and forth between Dan and me, but still had guts enough to defy us.

"She's my sister."

"Oh." He gulped. "I-I'm sorry, but even so, I'm not allowed to give out that infor—"

He broke off when I came around the desk after him. Holding up his hands to fend me off, he said, "Please, I can't. You have no idea how much trouble I'd be in."

But the lust within me needed an outlet, needed someone to pound on. Clenching my fists, I restrained it, saying, "You'll be in more trouble if you don't tell me."

"But . . . they're vampires," Jerry said, as if it trumped my threat.

I shoved my face into his. "Yeah, and I'm the vampire *slayer*." As the anger surged within me, I saw my purple eye-flash reflected in his pupils.

"Oh, crap." Jerry's voice was a mere squeak and he closed his eyes as if death were imminent. Too, he must be really confused by the lust that surged through him with my proximity.

Dan appeared behind Jerry looking amused. But he kept his voice serious as he said, "I don't think Jerry knows enough to be helpful, do you, Jerry?"

Jerry's eyes flew open and he grabbed on to Dan's words as if to a lifeline. His fear overcame his lust as he blurted, "No, no. He's right—I'm totally ignorant."

Fang snorted. If I weren't so ticked off, I'd find him amusing, too. I glanced at Dan to see where he was going with this. This was the best lead we had to find both Jen and Rick.

Dan came around the chair so he could smile down at the kid. "But I bet you know who can give us the information."

"Su-sure. One of the bosses."

I backed off and the relief on Jerry's face was almost comical.

"Okay," Dan said. "You let us talk to one of the bosses and she'll let you live."

"They're all accepting personal donations." Ick—he meant the fang to neck kind. "You'll have to wait in line—"

I took a step forward and Jerry raised his hands again. "But for you, I'll make an exception," he babbled.

I relaxed and glanced around the waiting room. About ninety percent of it had cleared out during our little altercation, and I raised an eyebrow at the remaining men and women. "Anyone mind if we go first?"

There was a chorus of hasty no's, except for one irate middle-aged woman who said, "I do—"

But the man sitting next to her clamped a hand over her mouth and said with a sickly smile, "Please, go ahead."

Fang growled and I glanced over to see what he was staring at. A vampire and his latest drooling "customer" had come out of the back room.

The vamp looked like a smirking college frat boy playing dress-up in a costume of a flowing white pirate shirt and tight black leather pants. He glanced down at Fang, then stupidly ignored him, dismissing the dog as no threat. "Who's next?" he asked arrogantly.

"Lorenzo . . ." the woman who had objected said with a sigh of longing.

Ignoring her, I smiled a predator's smile and focused on Lorenzo. "We are."

"We?" Lorenzo looked back and forth between Dan and me. "It's a little kinky, but what the heck."

As he led us back to a suite of rooms, Dan muttered, "You okay? You look like you're about to lose it."

I took a deep breath. "Yeah, I think so."

"Chill. I'll handle this part."

I nodded, realizing he was right—I needed to calm down.

Lorenzo gestured at three doors. "What's your fancy? Victorian bordello, woodland scene, or dungeon?"

I gaped at him for a moment until I realized he was asking where I wanted to experience the pleasure of his "kiss."

"Woodland," Dan said.

Good. I didn't want to think about the sort of person who chose the dungeon. Besides, we needed to question him in private, not out here in the hallway, but didn't need to be too distracted by our surroundings either.

We entered the large room. It was dark inside, but my eyes soon adjusted, and the illusion was so complete, I felt as if we'd entered another realm. Moonlight played over the pastoral scene, several sheltering trees shaded a bower that looked soft and inviting, and the scent of some fragrant, musky flower wafted by on a warm breeze.

Lorenzo lounged with practiced ease on the blanket, patting the space next to him invitingly.

Fang growled. LET ME AT HIM.

I waved him back. Lorenzo hadn't done anything wrong . . . yet. He thought we were willing blood donors, looking for a thrill.

I surreptitiously drew a stake from my back waistband and held it behind me as Dan said, "We aren't here for the game you think we are."

"Oh? And what game would your game be?"

"The game is, we ask the questions and you give the answers."

Annoyed, he snapped, "That's not the way it works here. What are you playing at?"

I glanced at Dan and he nodded, knowing what I needed to do. I dropped to my knees on the vamp's chest, shoved my forearm across his throat so he couldn't move, and held the stake in my other fist, poised over his heart.

"No, *we* ask the questions."

Anger flashed in his eyes as he tried to buck me off. When it didn't work, he tried to control my mind, even as his body responded to Lola's seductive force field.

Now I had him. "Okay, Dan, ask."

Dan sat on the vamp's legs so he'd stop kicking. "Do you know Jennifer Anderson?"

Lorenzo fought the lure of the succubus, which wasn't too difficult since Lola wasn't all that interested. "Go to hell," he snarled.

But the answer was clear in his mind—he did. I nodded at Dan to signal that the vamp did know Jen. It was easier if he asked the questions while I concentrated on reading the vamp's mind for the answers.

"Do you know where she is?" Dan asked. "Who's controlling her?"

I read the answer clearly. "No, he doesn't," I said. "And Alejandro has put the word out to find out who's doing it."

Lorenzo gaped up at me. "Who *are* you?"

"The Slayer." Dan loved to say that, apparently. Seeing recognition in the vamp's eyes, Dan added, "But if you're a good little vampire and tell us what we want to know, we may let you live."

Lorenzo frowned but stopped fighting. I read in his mind that Alejandro had told them to cooperate with me. He didn't want to, but he said, "Depends. What do you want to know?"

Since the vamp was being reasonable, I let up on my stranglehold.

I nodded at Dan who asked, "Did Jennifer's father come looking for her here last night?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"He made a big scene, tried to drag her out of here, but she wouldn't go."

I nodded to signal Lorenzo was playing it straight.

"So you killed him?" Dan asked.

"No! Alejandro wouldn't allow— That is, it wouldn't be right."

"So what did you do?"

"He was annoying the customers, scaring people away, so we tossed him out, told him never to come back."

He was telling the truth, but there was something else . . . "What aren't you telling us?" I asked.

"Nothing," Lorenzo assured me.

But he lied. There, clear in his mind, was what had really happened. Lorenzo had watched out the window as three vampires he thought of as the disenfranchised ones grabbed Rick. As they dragged him off, they laughed, saying they were going to bless him.

Bless him? What the heck would blessing mean to a vampire? Crosses and holy water were pure torture to them. With fear leaping in my chest, I asked, "What does that mean? What is a vampire blessing?"

Lorenzo gave up the information readily, obviously hoping it would hurt us. "That's their slang for bringing him over." Then, in case we didn't get it, he explained, "They plan to make him one of us."

My skin turned clammy and my head spun. *Ohmigod. They turned the only father I've known into a vampire.*

I had foolishly feared he would be dead, lying drained of blood somewhere. I thought that was the worst thing that could happen. But this . . . No, I couldn't even conceive of this.

My own blood drained from my face and I felt cold and clammy, a bit nauseous, and totally shell-shocked. I must have looked it, too, because the vampire just sprawled there staring at me, apparently pleased with his bombshell.

Dan questioned him some more, getting descriptions of the vampires, then took me gently by the arm and led me out a side door to the truck. Feeling numb, I sat huddled against the door, trying not to think, not to feel. I barely noticed when Fang cuddled up to me and licked my arm.

"You okay?" Dan asked.

"Yeah," I lied. "I just want to find them—somehow." I couldn't think beyond that. Wouldn't think beyond that. I stared straight ahead and Dan finally cranked the truck.

We drove around all night, trying to find more leads at the blood banks, on the streets, anywhere we could. No luck. Finally, exhausted and disappointed, I realized it was nearly dawn and the vamps would be holed up somewhere until the sun went down again, so we went home.

Depressed, I felt as if I were wandering in a fog. It didn't lift until Dan settled me on my sofa and sat next to me. "Talk to me, Val."

But it wasn't his words that penetrated my daze, it was his gentle touch as he brushed the hair from my face.

I glanced down at Fang who had curled up next to me on the couch. My hands had tightened in his fur without even realizing it. I loosened my death grip on the poor dog and stroked his wiry fur. He hadn't even complained. "It's all my fault," I said in a tight voice.

Dan took me into his arms. "Don't be ridiculous," he murmured as he held me close. "It's not your fault."

Oh wow, this was so nice. I snuggled into him like a child seeking comfort. But he was wrong. "Yes, it is," I said, my voice muffled in his chest. "If I had found Jen, none of this would have happened."

"You don't know that," Dan protested.

"Oh, please," I said and pulled away slightly. "Like being turned into a vampire is something that happens to just anyone."

"Didn't you say becoming a vampire has to be voluntary, since they have to drink the blood of the person who turns them?"

I stiffened. What was he getting at? "Usually, though it's possible that it could be forced."

"Then . . . maybe it was his choice," Dan suggested.

I expected Fang to respond to that, but he was so tuckered out, he'd gone to sleep.

I pulled away to look Dan in the eye. "What are you saying? That my stepfather *wanted* to become a vampire?"
Ridiculous.

"Maybe. Maybe they gave him no other choice."

"You mean die or become one of the undead?"

Dan nodded.

I thought for a moment. "No, I can't believe it. He helped me learn about them, helped me learn how to fight them. He would never *become* one. Who would make that kind of choice?"

"A lot of people have. From what we hear, more each day."

"Not Rick," I said with conviction.

Dan stroked my hair again. "Well, maybe he's not a vampire yet. Maybe he got away."

I'd like to believe that, like to believe it was possible, but I'd stopped believing in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and magic wishes a long time ago. And I could tell Dan didn't believe it, either. He was only trying to calm me.
"Nice try, but I doubt it."

"Don't worry, we'll find out, one way or the other."

Yeah, that's what bothered me. I closed my eyes against the pain. How had everything gotten so messed up? Just when things were looking up, when I'd gained a wonderful dog, a partner who stood up for me, and an incredible new family member who liked me for myself, fate had to dump on me and rip away my joy.

Worse, just when I'd finally found someone to care about, the universe had ensured he was the one guy who would never care about me.

What the heck did I do to deserve this? Was it payback for thinking I was stronger, faster, better than others? Or for being not quite human?

Dan kissed my forehead and longing surged within me. Not desire, but a yearning for normality, for a lasting bond with someone, like the one he shared with his sister.

Even if I couldn't have my cake, I was willing to settle for a few crumbs.

I tentatively put my arms around him, accepting the comfort he seemed to be offering. When he returned the favor, I clung to him, soaking in the wonderful feeling. In his arms, I felt safe, cared for . . . almost human.

Lola wasn't interested in these kind of feelings, but I could feel the desire rising within him—undoubtedly a purely physical reaction. "Aren't you afraid?" I asked into his neck.

"Afraid of what?"

"Of Lola. Of what she could do to you."

"No, Micah explained some things. I know that if you wanted to, you could force me to make love to you."

"Actually, I could only force you to feel desire. What you do with that desire is up to you." It was important he understand that I hadn't made him *do* anything.

"Point taken."

"But of course I wouldn't ever force you intentionally," I assured him earnestly.

"I know that now."

He sounded sad and more than a little tired. All of a sudden, I realized how horrible this must be for him. I sighed heavily. "I'm so sorry, Dan."

"For what?"

"For getting you involved in my messy life."

His gave me a little squeeze. "Don't worry about it. I'm not. You need me now."

"Thanks." This was getting way too emotional and I sounded like some wimpy crybaby. I wanted him to feel safe, to not worry that I might be crushing on him or anything.

Reluctantly, I pulled away and injected some mischief into my voice. "Friends are good. But maybe Micah can introduce me to a nice part-demon boy, one who can tolerate Lola. Shade is kind of cute, when he's not all dark and swirly. You think he might be interested?"

I glanced up at Dan who looked a little weirded out by the whole idea.

I laughed. "Never mind." I woke Fang and headed on home to get some sleep before I had to be the big bad vampire slayer again.

In bed, worry settled over me like a blanket. Was Rick really a vampire? Had they turned Jen as well? If not, what did they want with her? Were either of them still even alive? And how the hell was I going to find them?

I knew one thing for sure. I'd rise before the vampires and be there for Jen . . . the way no one ever was there for me.

Try Me

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I woke up in the early afternoon to a knock on the door. It was Dan. He hadn't even taken time to shave, and the dark shadow on his face made him look dangerous and rather sexy.

He thrust a crumpled piece of paper at me. "Someone threw a rock through my window. This was attached to it."

TELL THE SLAYER TO STOP HER INVESTIGATION NOW, OR SHE'LL LOSE MORE FAMILY MEMBERS.

The sender of this note probably intended to cause fear, but all I felt was rage.

Dan's expression turned grim. "You aren't giving up."

I shoved the door closed behind him. "Not a chance."

"Good for you."

"Any idea where it came from?"

He shook his head. "Anyone could have printed it off on a computer."

"Yeah. I—" I broke off as I noticed the hellhound sniffing the note. "What is it, Fang?"

I SMELL HUMAN.

I relayed the info to Dan and asked Fang, "Do you recognize the scent?"

NO.

"Could you follow the scent?"

I AIN'T A HELLHOUND FOR NOTHIN', BABE.

"He can," I told Dan.

Dan frowned. "If the guy who left this used a car, you might not get very far. And it's still daylight, so it must have been left by a human servant, not your sister's actual controller."

All true, but . . . "It's worth a try."

I dressed in record time and we hurried over to Dan's townhouse. I turned to Fang. "Go to it."

The terrier put his nose to the ground beneath the window and sniffed, then sped eagerly across the small lawn to the curb where he stopped and ran in circles for a few moments, whining.

Stopped already?

Dan sighed. "I was afraid of this—"

I'LL GET IT, I'LL GET IT. JUST HOLD ON.

"A hellhound's nose is supposed to be far more sensitive than a normal dog's," I explained. "If the scent isn't too old, maybe he can still follow it."

YEAH, I GOT A LINE ON IT. LET ME TRY.

"Come on, let's use the Valkyrie. It'll be easier."

We had to take Fang's seat off the back to accommodate Dan, but he held onto Fang. They both gave me directions as I slowly followed the scent trail on the motorcycle, ignoring the rude comments of the other motorists who objected to our slow speed.

It didn't take long to figure out where we were going. "Betcha we're going to end up at Alejandro's mansion," Dan yelled above the wind.

Sure enough, we did. When we got there, Fang jumped down and sniffed furiously around the gate. "Did he get out here?" I asked.

YES, BUT HE DIDN'T GO INSIDE THE GATE. THE SCENT STOPS OUTSIDE IT.

I relayed the info to Dan, asking, "What does that mean?"

"Maybe he stopped here and got out, but didn't go in."

"Why?"

Dan shrugged. "Could be he picked up the note here and we followed him to his point of origin."

"Or he got into another car."

"Possible. The problem is, we don't know if we were following his trail back to where he came from, or after he left the note off."

I glanced down at Fang. "Can you tell?"

NOPE. SORRY.

"Should we continue following the scent?" Dan asked. "Either way, we might find him."

"No." I glared at the mansion, which looked innocuous and innocent in the daylight. "Everything always seems to come back to Alejandro. Let's see if we can get some answers."

I punched the code in and the gates opened. Either no one had bothered to change it or Alejandro thought he had nothing to hide.

Two beefy no-neck guards clad all in black met us at the end of the drive, arms crossed and expressions glowering. And if I wasn't mistaken, they were packing quite a bit of firepower under those loose jackets.

"Hi," I said cheerfully, staying on the bike. "Guards are new. Is Alejandro having some problems he hasn't told us about?"

The guard on the right said, "This is private property. You're trespassing."

"How can we be trespassing if we had the code to get in?" I asked, still keeping my tone light.

That seemed to stump him, but guard number two said, "Alejandro didn't say he was expecting visitors today."

"True, we're not expected, but can't old friends drop in and see each other? He said we were always welcome."

"Not during the day," number two said. "No one is welcome until after dark. If you want to see him, come back then."

"But—" I dropped what I was going to say when number one reached inside his jacket.

Dan tightened his grip around my waist. "We'll be back at sunset."

"So long." I played along, waggled my fingers at them and did a one-eighty on the bike to leave the property.

About a half block away, I stopped and looked back. Was Jen inside? Was Rick?

"Don't even think about it," Dan warned. "There are probably two more at the back of the house, and there's no way we're getting in through those shuttered windows. Do what he said—come back tonight."

"Okay." The really dangerous time was after the sun went down, but it griped my butt to have to wait. "Why do you think he has so many security guards?"

"Either the attacks at the blood banks have escalated and he fears for his life or he's doing something he shouldn't."

"You think the increased precautions have something to do with Jen and Rick?"

"There's no way of knowing. I'd rather worry about something I *can* control. Maybe we can follow the rest of that scent?"

Fang tried, but lost the trail when it crossed Loop 410. There was just too much traffic on the highway and too many exhaust fumes to follow one individual scent.

Just in case I'd ticked off the person who sent that threatening note, I called Mom. I warned her not to leave the house and to not, under any circumstances, invite anyone in.

When I was certain Mom understood how important this was, Dan and I got the latest skinny from Ramirez and Micah, then stocked up on weapons. I wasn't really planning on fighting my way into the mansion, but I wanted to be ready if I had to.

When the sun set behind the horizon, Dan, Fang and I were already waiting at Alejandro's. Once the shutters on the windows opened, we figured it was safe to make our move.

The two guards glared at us but didn't stop us from ringing the doorbell.

After a few minutes, Alejandro's lieutenant, Austin, answered and tipped his cowboy hat. "Howdy, ma'am . . . sir. Nice to see you again."

He was so pleasant, I suddenly wondered if I'd overreacted. "Can we see Alejandro?"

"Yes, ma'am." He opened the door wide and let us in.

I couldn't resist shooting a triumphant glance at the no-necks guarding the door outside. But the glance was wasted—their attention was turned outside, to the grounds.

Austin led us to the very masculine study where we had been before. When Alejandro spotted us, he broke off his conversation with two underlings and waved them away. Smiling, he gestured us to chairs. "To what do I owe this honor?" he asked, charming as always.

Dan deferred to me with a glance.

"My sister is still missing," I said without preamble. Alejandro's smile faded a little as he shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid you were right about her being controlled."

Dan sat forward like a dog on point. "How do you know?"

"A human can only be controlled by one vampire at a time. So, to test her, I had one of my lieutenants try to control her."

"Which one?" I demanded.

"That would be me, ma'am," Austin said.

"And?" I asked.

"I couldn't get her to do a darned thing."

"Confirming that she's being controlled by someone else?"

Alejandro and Austin both nodded.

"Then who?"

Alejandro spread his hands. "I'm sorry, we have no way of knowing that, but I'm doing everything I can to find out."

Dan scowled. "How about her father? Are you aware he came to one of your blood banks and was thrown out?"

Alejandro nodded gravely. "Yes. What would you have us do? He was causing a scene."

"Were you also aware that some vampires grabbed him and said they were going to force him to join your little undead club?"

The vamp leader seemed truly surprised. "You do not think one of my people did it, do you?"

In answer, I handed him the note.

Dan added, "That was thrown through my window this afternoon. We followed the scent of your delivery boy back to here."

Alejandro stared at us incredulously. "Surely you do not think I left such a note?"

Maybe. On one hand, he had readily agreed to see us, which argued that he was innocent of any wrongdoing—in this, anyway. On the other hand, all clues seemed to lead here.

Fruitlessly, I wished I had thought far enough ahead to have something of Rick's for Fang to sniff. If I had, we might be able to tell if Rick was here or not. Jen wasn't. Fang had pretty thoroughly used his nose all the way in. If he'd smelled my sister, he would have let me know.

"I don't know what to think," I said honestly as I rose in preparation to leave. "But I can tell you this. If any of my family is harmed in any way, I will personally hunt down the monsters responsible and feed them to the sun. Is that clear?"

"Just let us know if you need any help," Austin offered.

I took a step back in surprise. That wasn't the response I'd expected at all.

Fang looked up at me. YEAH, AND I DON'T TRUST IT.

Alejandro rose and took my hand in both of his. Strange how they had no warmth in them. "Austin is quite right. We are fighting for an accommodation with humans, fighting to assure our place—peacefully—alongside you. The beasts who have done these heinous acts are not welcome within our organization, nor this city. We will root them out and destroy them."

"O-okay," I said. That was exactly what I wanted, but again, they had managed to surprise me with the unexpected.

Alejandro's hand tightened on mine. "If we hear any word, get any lead, we will let you know."

"Good, good," was all I could say. I pulled my hand away and followed Austin out the door.

As all three of us got on the motorcycle, Dan asked, "Do you believe him?"

I sighed. "Yeah, I think I do."

"I think we're making a big mistake."

"Maybe. But what can we do? Everything we've learned points to Jen and Rick not being there."

"We can do some more good old-fashioned detective work."

"Okay." None of our other leads were panning out, so it was our only choice. But I had a feeling I'd better find them soon . . . or it would be too late.

We decided to head back to the blood bank. It was a long shot, but maybe Lorenzo could give us more information about the vampires who took Rick.

About three-quarters of the way there, Dan tapped on my shoulder and signaled for me to pull over. I swerved over to the side of the road and gave him a questioning look.

"Phone," he said briefly. He answered it and listened for a moment, then handed it to me. "Micah gave Shade my number. He wants to talk to you."

I had been kidding about Shade being a potential boyfriend, but surprisingly, the disapproving glint in Dan's eyes indicated he thought I was serious. Interesting.

Amused, I answered the phone.

"About ten minutes after you left, four people arrived at the mansion—two men and two women. One was your sister."

My heartbeat quickened as my amusement vanished. Finally—a lead. "Are you sure?" And why hadn't we seen Shade?

"Yes—she matches the picture Micah gave me."

"Did you recognize any of the others?" Maybe Rick was with them.

"No, they were all in a car, and she's the only one I got a good look at."

"Did they say anything?" Like how long they were going to be there?

"The only thing I heard didn't make sense." Shade sounded uncertain. "I just caught a snatch of it as they went through the gates."

"What did you hear?"

"Something about performing a . . . blessing at midnight?"

Oh, crap. "What did they say?" I demanded. "Did they say who was going to be blessed?"

"No, just something about having delayed it long enough."

Delayed whose? Jen's? Rick's? Fear pounded in my chest, making my voice more abrupt than I intended. "Is that all?"

"I'm sorry," Shade said. "That's all I heard."

It wasn't his fault he didn't know more "Thank you," I said fervently. "If you hear or see anything more, will you call us?"

"Of course."

I hung up and handed the phone back to Dan, turning sideways on the motorcycle to fill him in on what Shade had told me. The more I thought about it, the more angry I became. "Damn it, he played us."

"Alejandro?"

"Yeah. He acted so damned innocent, when all along he must have know what was going on."

Dan's lips tightened, probably restraining himself from saying, "I told you so." Instead, he said, "We don't know for sure that he's involved in this blessing thing . . . and it might not be your sister they're talking about."

I glared at him. "Would you chance it with your family?"

"No—"

"Well, one thing's for sure—she's there. At least I can remove her from danger."

"If her controller will let you," Dan said.

Okay, point taken. "I don't care. I'll make her come with me whether she wants to or not."

I turned back around, but Dan stilled my hand on the throttle. "It's too dangerous."

"I don't care. My sister—"

"It's too dangerous *for her* if we go in, weapons blazing. Especially with only two of us against a houseful of vamps. Backup will increase our chances of getting her out unharmed."

I twisted around to look at him again. "And where are we going to get that?"

"Ramirez."

I thought for a moment, then nodded. "Okay, let's call him."

"This is probably best done in person—it's a hell of a big favor to ask."

"It will take too long—"

"You heard Shade—nothing's going to happen until midnight. We have hours yet."

He was right again, though the energy sizzling through my blood didn't like the delay. "Let's do it fast, then."

I gunned the motor on the Valkyrie and zoomed off toward the West Substation. Fang elected to wait outside as Dan and I went inside. Ramirez was in, though he had someone in his office.

I blurted out, "We need to talk to you. It's urgent."

Ramirez glanced back and forth between us, then dismissed the guy he'd been talking to. "What's up?"

"We need a raid on Alejandro's mansion," I said urgently.

"Why?"

"He's got my sister in there."

Ramirez looked sympathetic, but said, "I can't perform a raid just because her big sister doesn't like who she hangs out with."

"But she's being controlled by a vampire," I protested. "They're going to hurt her." This wasn't some frivolous request—Ramirez knew that.

"Do you have proof of that?"

"No, but—"

Dan cut in. "Alejandro admitted that she's under control."

"By him?"

"No, but—"

"That's not proof," Ramirez said apologetically.

"There's something going down tonight," Dan said. "They may be planning to turn Jennifer into a vampire."

Oh, Lord, it sounded even more real, even more plausible when he said it aloud. "We have to save her," I insisted. "She has no free will. She can't choose this for herself."

Ramirez leaned forward, looking intent. "Do you have proof of this?"

Annoyed by his stupid refrain, I snapped, "One of Micah's people saw her go in to the house, heard them say a blessing had been delayed too long." Quickly, I explained what Lorenzo had told us about the term blessing and what I feared.

Ramirez looked disappointed. "That's it? That's all you have?"

"I know it doesn't sound like much—" Dan began.

"Wait," the lieutenant said. "Let me get this straight. Up until now, you've found nothing to indicate that Alejandro or his movement has done anything wrong, correct?"

I scowled. "Yes, but—"

Ramirez cut me off with a sharp gesture. "You said this Lorenzo didn't recognize the vampires who took your stepfather, that he thought of them as unaffiliated, which means they probably don't belong to the Movement." Overriding my protest, he continued, "And your sister has been working for them for at least a month, unharmed. Do you think your concern might arise from the fact that you're scared for your sister, that you have no other leads, that you want this to be true so badly that you've convinced yourself it is, despite the evidence to the contrary?"

I stared at him for a moment, surprised steam wasn't coming out of my ears. Forcing myself to sound calm and reasonable, I said, "Look, I know it sounds flimsy, but if you give us the people, we'll get the proof."

"Sorry, I can't do it. I can't commit city resources on a tenuous possibility. And without some kind of evidence to back up your claim, I won't be able to get a warrant and I can't justify invading a private citizen's residence without it."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. "Private citizen? He's a *vampire*. Can the undead own property? Do they have the same rights as the living?"

"The law doesn't recognize the existence of vampires, so as far as it is concerned, if he's walking and talking, he's alive. *And* entitled to the same protection as everyone else."

I appealed mutely to Dan.

He gave me an apologetic look. "He's right. His hands are tied."

"Well, ours aren't," I declared.

Ramirez rose from his desk and jabbed his finger at me. "You two are *not* going in there alone, do you hear me? It's suicide if you do."

And homicide if we didn't. "So you admit it's dangerous?"

"Going into a vampire's den, uninvited, with intent to kidnap or do bodily harm? It's dangerous—and it has nothing to do with whether they're guilty or innocent."

"But—"

"Enough. Promise me that the two of you won't do anything so stupid or I'll toss your butts in jail right now."

"Can he do that?" I asked Dan incredulously.

Dan shrugged. "Probably."

I glared at him. "If we promise, what the hell do you expect us to do?"

"I *expect* you to do your job. Get out there and get me proof. With that, I can help you."

"All right," Dan said. "We'll do that."

Ramirez spared me with a glance, silently demanding my agreement as well.

It went against everything I knew was right, but I had too much respect for the lieutenant to lie to him. Then again, I couldn't do anything to help Jen and Rick if I was in jail. "Okay, okay. But when we get proof, you'd better not slow-roll me."

"I won't," Ramirez confirmed.

I stomped out of the police station, Dan right behind me. As I swung my leg over my motorcycle, I asked, "How can we get proof?"

"Let me think a minute."

Well, I knew what my first thought was—go in anyway and damn the consequences. Those were my second and third thoughts, too. I didn't want to break my promise, but Jen and Rick's lives were in danger. I had to see if Jen was all right, had to find Rick, had to see his fangs for myself.

Mom certainly wouldn't be satisfied with anything less. If I didn't have first-hand knowledge of exactly what had happened to Rick, Mom might do something stupid . . . like go after him herself.

No, that couldn't happen. I couldn't lose another family member to the vampires—even a mother who didn't want me. They might not consider me a part of the family any more, but damn it, they were part of mine.

I had to find out the truth for myself, no matter what the lieutenant said. If only I could rescue them without breaking my promise. I went back over the conversation, looking for a loophole . . . and found it. We'd promised that the two of us wouldn't go in after Jen. Fine—I'd make it just one of us. This was too dangerous for pure humans anyway—Dan's injuries during our previous encounters proved it. Better to let demons battle monsters.

Fang shoved my hand. **THAT'S THE TICKET.**

But I'd better not share my thoughts with Dan. He'd just try to talk me out of it, or insist on going along. I didn't want to have to worry about him as well.

Dan sat behind me on the bike and got Fang settled. "Let's find out more about the blessing ceremony. If we can prove it's being done, show that the humans who go in to Alejandro's come out as vampires, maybe that'll be enough proof."

"Do you really think that's enough?" I asked.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"No." Besides, I wanted him safely out of the way and this looked like the best way of doing it.

"Okay, then let's check out Micah's database, see what we can find."

Since it was Sunday and the club was closed, Dan called first and Micah agreed to meet us there.

As we drove to Purgatory, I rethought my strategy. When we arrived and parked in the rear, I said, "I've been thinking. You don't need me here, so I'll do some investigation on my own."

"Like what?"

"I'll check out my *Encyclopedia Magicka*, see if there's any mention of the ceremony." Though I knew there was nothing—I would have remembered. "Then I'll visit a psychic friend of mine."

Dan raised an eyebrow. "How will that help?"

"She might be able to tell me what to do, what path to take."

He narrowed his eyes at her, looking suspicious. "You've never mentioned her before."

Because she didn't exist. "Yeah, well, you haven't exactly been open to talk about magic users, have you?"

He shrugged, conceding the point.

"Okay, I'll call you and check in whether I learn anything or not. Then I'll be back to pick you up." If I survive.

"Okay."

Dan went inside the club and I sat for a moment, contemplating Fang. What should I do about him?

WHAT'S TO WONDER? YOU TAKE ME WITH YOU.

I glanced around and saw a reserved parking spot marked "Blackburn." The fancy car in it must be Micah's . . . and it was unlocked. Perfect. Without letting my true intentions show in my conscious mind, I said, "Let's take Micah's car."

But when Fang jumped inside, I shut the door.

Fang stared at me with a mixture of disbelief and fury on his furry face. YOU DID NOT JUST DO THAT.

"I'm afraid I did." He was a very small dog, and no matter how much hellhound he had in him, he was no match for an entire vein of vampires, though he had heart enough to try. I couldn't bear to lose him, either.

LOSE ME? WHO SAYS YOU'LL LOSE ME? He pawed at the window. LET ME OUT.

"I'm sorry, Fang. I have to go to the mansion, and you'll be safer this way." And if I didn't make it back, Micah would take care of him.

NO. NO WAY ARE YOU LEAVING ME HERE. LET ME OUTTA HERE! Fang went nuts, leaping around the car and barking furiously. Ignoring his temper tantrum, I headed home to stock up on weapons. I needed to be ready for anything and everything . . . including the possibility that I might fail, that I might die.

I squared my shoulders. Well if I did, I'd make sure I took the whole freakin' vein of vampires with me.

Try Me

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I paused at the edge of Alejandro's property, considering my options. This time, I didn't want to announce my presence. Unfortunately, there was a clear line of sight from the front door to the gates. The guards would see me if I used the code to get in.

I scouted the fence. Good—there were some trees alongside. Lousy security, but if you were already dead in a city of mostly humans I guess you didn't worry too much about security.

I hooked a crossbow on my back belt loop and settled a scabbard across my back so I could easily reach the sword's hilt behind my head. Once I was sure they were secure, I shimmied up the trunk then swung up onto a limb. One of the branches conveniently crossed over the dangerous *fleurs de lis* on the top of the wrought iron fence, and I crawled out until I was over the estate grounds.

I paused, assessing the threat. The guards didn't have the advantage of the excellent senses the vamps had, and I hadn't seen any sign of electronic security or dogs—animals wouldn't work for vamps. I was probably safe. I dropped to the ground, relieved when no alarms went off.

The guards remained at the entrance and exit, not patrolling the grounds, so it was easy to make my way silently to the window where I'd seen Alejandro twice before. It seemed to be the happening place.

Sure enough, when I peered in the window, I spotted Jen inside, with Alejandro and three of his lieutenants. Four vamps.

No, make that six. Two more vamps suddenly came into view, dragging Rick between them.

Finally, a break—Jen and Rick were together. Now, if only luck stayed with me and helped me take on six vamps at once. I wasn't sure there was a hope in hell of doing that with everyone coming out alive, but I had to try.

I stared intently at Rick for any signs that he'd been turned, but his mouth was duct-taped and his arms were held securely by the two unknown vamps. He looked pale, but that could be fear, the situation, a lot of things. I still didn't know if he'd been made into a vampire or not, but either way, he needed rescuing.

Unfortunately, I couldn't hear anything they were saying. And if I tried to climb in the closed window, I'd lose the element of surprise. I worked my way around the side of the house until I found a window into an empty room. It opened silently, and I climbed in, then made my way through the dark room.

Cautiously, I peered out into the hallway. No one there. I slipped into the hall, keeping the weapons ready, yet hidden behind my back. Without visible weaponry, I might be able to bluff my way past if I came upon anyone. Luckily, I didn't, and I made it without incident to the room where Jen and Rick were being held.

The doors were too thick for me to hear anything being said inside the room. Shoot—I had to get inside. I unsheathed the sword, got a good grip on it, and took a deep breath. Lola, sensing upcoming action, fizzed to life in my blood. I let her come more fully than I ever had before. In this, we were united with one purpose. As ready as I'd ever be, I burst in through the door, yelling, "Nobody move!"

They all froze for an instant and I took advantage of it to close the door and move aside so my back was against a wall and I was facing all of them.

Alejandro and his three lieutenants were grouped together on the opposite side of the room, with him seated and the three of them behind him. Rick and his captors were to my left, on the other side of the door, and Jen was in the center. Everyone was within range of my sword.

Taking advantage of their initial surprise, I said, "Jen, come here."

Unfortunately, she ignored me, still controlled.

My words seemed to break the spell for the others and they all relaxed a little, probably because I was alone.

"Are you mad?" Luis asked, going all aristocratic and snooty. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Ask Alejandro," I snapped.

Alejandro sighed. "I know this looks bad, but your stepfather is being held because he has become a menace."

"He threw holy water on two of my men," Lily said indignantly.

I suppressed a smile. Go, Rick! "And Jen?" I asked Alejandro.

"I asked your sister to come in so we could discover who is controlling her."

"Have you?"

"Not yet."

I nodded. Just as I'd thought. "Then I'll just have to start killing vampires one by one until she's released."

Alejandro looked hurt. "I thought we had an agreement. Do you not trust me?"

"No." Not where my family was concerned. I aimed the sword at Alejandro to make sure he got the point.

"Don't you dare hurt Alejandro," Jen said.

"So he's your controller," I mused aloud, hoping for confirmation.

Luis just snorted derisively.

"Well, now," Austin drawled. "That would be convenient, wouldn't it? But she's bluffing. Or rather, her controller is, through her."

Lily nodded. "It can't be Alejandro. He's the one trying to change things. He's forbidden this."

I wavered, wondering who it could be. They made sense, but someone had to be lying. The controller could be one of the head honchos—Alejandro, Luis, Austin, or Lily—or even Rosa, who was missing. Then again, I couldn't dismiss the underlings as possibilities either.

But I had to choose one, so I chose Luis. I'd never liked his smarmy attitude anyway. "You first," I said, aiming the point of the sword at him.

I'd hoped for a reaction, but not the one I got.

Jen pulled a pistol from her waistband and pointed it at me with both hands. "I can't let you kill anyone," she said in a steely tone so unlike my sister.

"What idiot gave my sister a gun?"

No one confessed and Jen's gun never wavered.

I had to remember that Jen wasn't in control of her actions, someone else was. "What are you going to do? Shoot me, your own sister?" I hoped there was some small spark of Jen hiding inside, one that would be appalled and be able to break free.

But it didn't work. Jen pointed the gun at her father. "No, I'll shoot him. Or myself." Grinning something more like a grimace, the expression clearly forced onto her face by someone else, she held the gun to her head. "Nobody move or the little girl gets it."

The effect of the controller's words in Jen's mouth was chilling. There was no doubt in anyone's mind now that Jennifer was controlled, obviously by someone in this room. That let Rosa out as a suspect.

"Coward," I accused the controller through Jen. "Reveal yourself and stop hiding behind a young girl."

Jen continued to smirk. "No, I think it's more fun this way." She pulled the hammer back on the pistol, still holding it to her temple.

"You don't want to do that," I said quickly. "If you kill Jen, I'll make sure you and everyone else in this room dies a horrible death."

Jen laughed. "Not before one of us gets you first."

"Us?"

"Oops. Didn't I mention I have allies in the room?"

The vamps all froze, their gazes darting around the small space as if wondering who was on which side. Now no one was certain of anyone else. Well, at least I wasn't the only one in the dark.

Unfortunately, they all did the darting gaze thing. The controller was too clever to let himself be caught that way.

But since he hadn't killed Jen yet, he must have a reason. "What do you want?" And who was I talking to? This was incredibly strange, speaking to Jen as if she were a monster, not knowing who I was really dealing with.

Jen's eyes narrowed as she channeled her master's emotions. "You. I want you to suffer, Slayer. You've caused me nothing but trouble, you and your sister. Made me tip my hand too soon."

I flicked my gaze back and forth among all the vamps. Which one was it? It could be any of them, but I'd bet on Alejandro or one of his lieutenants. But if I chose wrong, killed the wrong vamp, the real evil in the room would pull the trigger and Jen would be dead. *Unacceptable.*

I stalled for more time. "If you didn't want me to come after you, you shouldn't have taken my family."

Rage erupted on Jen's face and she shoved the gun harder against her own head. "Jennifer learned too much too soon. Then you and that sorry excuse for a man came sniffing around and made it even worse."

At first, I thought she meant Dan, until I saw Jen remove the pistol from her forehead and level it at Rick. Rick, whose eyes pleaded with me to save his daughter.

I'm trying, aren't I?

Unfortunately, his and Jen's faces were the only ones in the room that showed any expression. How could I figure out which vamp was the controller?

"Maybe I should just kill you," Jen muttered, and the gun swung toward me.

But before I could do anything, Jen swerved to look at the door. Two other vamps came in, dragging two more prisoners—Dan and Fang. Both were completely subdued by their captors, Fang in a cage, and Dan in a headlock with his mouth shut by duct tape. But they hadn't been captured quietly. The vamps looked a bit worse for wear.

YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE LEFT ME, Fang whined, pacing the limits of his tiny cage.

Sorry, I didn't want you in danger. Didn't want this. My heart sank. I'd hoped someone I cared about would survive tonight, but it was looking less and less likely all the time.

The two newly arrived vamps looked around the room curiously, but settled on Alejandro. "We caught them trying to sneak in."

Jen grinned, her pistol wavering back and forth between Rick and her two new targets. "Excellent. So who's gonna buy it, Slayer? Your partner, your stepfather, your sister, or your little doggie?"

Alejandro shouted, "Shield them."

All of the vamps moved, but halted when Jen yelled, "Stop—or one of my people will stake you."

Once again, they didn't know who was on which side, and obviously no one wanted to take the chance of getting staked to save a mere human.

"Choose one," Jen barked at me.

"No." *Impossible.*

"Then I will." Using the pistol to point first to herself then the other captives in turn, she said, "Eenie meenie, minie, moe . . ."

No, this couldn't be happening.

Alejandro made an abortive movement, but Austin restrained him, saying, "I won't let you put yourself in danger."

I didn't know where this nursery rhyme would end up, but none of the choices was even thinkable. I had to take action, had to kill the controller. They all appeared to be on the right side, but one was lying. Who was it?

Even if I chose correctly and killed the controller, his minions would probably tear the humans limb from limb.

". . . if he hollers, let him go . . ."

The demon inside me urged me to do something, *anything*. I couldn't contain this frustration, this lust for revenge much longer.

So . . . why contain it at all? If I enthralled the controller like he was enthralling Jen, *I'd* have all the control.

But if I used my power with so little chance of directing it at only certain men, Dan would be caught by Lola just as surely as the rest.

I had no other choice—Jen was nearing the end of the rhyme and it looked like he would be the first one killed. Better alive and pissed than dead.

For the first time in my life, I *used* my power. Not only did I loose all restraints on Lola, but I put force behind it and *pushed*, willing the men to feel desire and find me irresistible.

Powerful, feeling totally in charge, I commanded, "Freeze."

It succeeded beyond my wildest dreams as every man, totally enthralled, did exactly as I ordered. I could feel the power within me reach out to all of them, compelling their obedience, enjoying their worship of Val Shapiro.

It was as if I had live wires of energy connecting me to each man in the room, whether dead or undead. Where each "wire" entered their bodies, it fanned out in strings of power to touch and penetrate each of the seven chakras, the sacred energy centers of their bodies. Through these invisible lines of power, I felt as though I could pluck a string and feel it vibrate throughout their entire being.

But it was strongest in the second chakra, the one related to sexuality. Experimentally, I strummed the strand that led to that energy center, but I didn't have enough fine control to choose just one. Instead, the power thrummed

through every man in the room, freeing their desire, sending their dark, powerful need roiling toward me like an out-of-control tidal wave of lust.

I braced myself for the onslaught, but Lola knew just what to do with it, channeling the powerful slap of desire into the starved power centers of my own body, soaking it up like a sponge.

Somewhere deep inside, I felt sickened by the fact that I could control them like mindless puppets, but I couldn't help but exult in the raw power and energy flowing from them to me, feeding my starved senses.

HOLY CRAP, Fang said in awe. DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING?

Forcibly, I brought myself back to the here and now. Though it had felt like hours, it couldn't have been more than a few seconds.

Jen turned toward me, eyes narrowed, and pointed the gun at me. "What's going on? What did you do?"

Only a woman controller would ask that question, be *able* to ask that question right now. Without hesitation, I swung my arm back and lopped Lily's head off.

Dan's ex-fiancée's body crumpled to the ground, her head dropping next to it as she bled on Alejandro's pretty rug. Strange, there wasn't as much blood as I expected. But it was one of the grosser things I've ever had to do to get my sister out of a scrape.

Fang sniffed her. THAT'S ONE WAY TO END AN ARGUMENT.

Jen staggered, looking dazed, then stared at the pistol in her hand. She dropped it as if it were a poisonous snake. When it hit the carpet, it went off, hitting one of Dan's captors in the knee. But the vamp was so intent on me, he didn't even notice.

I hoped he wasn't one of the good guys. Either way, he'd heal fast.

"Jen?" I said again, letting the sword point fall.

My sister rushed toward me and threw her arms around me, sobbing and clinging. "Thank you. Oh, thank you for saving me."

Okay, that was the real Jen. Incredibly relieved, I hugged her back, finding it a little easier to control my puppets now.

Lieutenant Ramirez burst into the room, followed by about two dozen men. But they weren't cops. Startled, I recognized some of the bartenders from the club. These were all Micah's friends—part demons. Lola reached out greedily to gather them to her as well, but I stopped her. I could barely handle the ones I already had in thrall.

"What's going on?" Ramirez demanded, looking surprised when no one moved. They all remained intent on me, waiting for my next command.

"Uh, they're under my control," I said sheepishly as I released Jen. "All but Lily who's dead now." I wouldn't apologize for that—Lily deserved what she got.

"So I see," Ramirez said dryly and signaled to his men to stand down.

They milled around, staring curiously at the enthralled men and giving Lily's headless body a wide berth. Surprisingly, I was able to maintain my hold without effort, though it felt odd to be so hyper aware of so many men at once.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Ramirez. "Aren't you the one who said you couldn't help me?"

"I couldn't commit city resources to help you," he corrected me. "But when my wife got a call from Micah, she badgered me to lead the rescue party in an unofficial capacity."

I grinned. "I'd like to meet your wife some day."

Ramirez smiled back. "The feeling is mutual. Besides, we did get proof of a sort. Dan and Micah figured out that Lily was behind all of this. His records kept mentioning a 'Strong Arm' doing the blessings. Or rather Armstrong—Lily Armstrong. Micah contacted me as Dan and Fang headed here."

Oh, no—Dan was still spellbound with the rest of them. I glanced around. "Some of them are Lily's allies, but I don't know which." And I didn't know how to turn this power off selectively any more than I had known how to turn it on selectively—it was all or none.

The lieutenant shrugged. "So ask."

Duh. Of course. "Those of you who were working for Lily, raise your hands."

The two vamps who had held Rick raised their hands, still looking besotted with me.

"Restrain them," Ramirez ordered.

His band of demons jumped to obey, apparently happy to find an outlet for their frustrated adrenaline.

"Hold them tight," I cautioned them, "because I'm going to release them."

And it was easy enough to do, with the demon inside me completely sated for the first time in my life. With only a little regret, I let them all go and drew the succubus's energy back into myself. Now that I was no longer so intimately connected to all of them, I felt relief and a determination to talk to Micah. He was right—I couldn't live my life trying to suppress my demon all the time. I had to learn to live with her.

The first to snap out of the spell were Austin and Alejandro.

Austin rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful. "Interesting power you have there, little lady."

Alejandro stared down at Lily, regret and confusion in his eyes.

I sighed. "Uh, sorry about the rug."

He shrugged. "It is nothing. And I had no idea . . . Why would she do this? She had such potential."

Jen, who had finally released her stranglehold on me, answered. "When I was working at the blood bank, I overheard her talking to someone—that's why she enthralled me. She said she needed you to build the organization with your charisma, but once you had the power base established, she'd take it over and run it her way." Jen shivered. "I don't think you'd like her way."

That was an understatement. But before I could respond, I was suddenly enveloped in a man's arms. Rick, freed of all restraints, had gathered Jen and me into a group hug. "Thank God, both my girls are safe."

Oh, wow. Was I still his girl? Emotion ambushed me, made me want to cling to him like a child. But I'd been hurt so much. Could I trust this?

I stiffened and tried to pull away, but Rick wasn't having it. He squashed us to him and held onto both of us like he'd been terrified he might lose us forever. Not just Jen—me, too.

I gave in. With Lola blissfully satisfied, I realized that for the first time in my life, I could hug him without consequences. As I clutched him and soaked in the wonderful feeling, I also realized that a normal life had been within my grasp all along. Starving Lola didn't work. It made things worse. Made her constantly prowl like a cat in zoo cage. But now, in this moment, I could just be Rick's daughter.

Thank God he was safe, too—he wasn't a vampire. But I couldn't help but say, "I told you not to go after her."

He pulled back to look at me. "I know, I know. And you saved me just in the nick of time, too. They were going to force me to become one of them tonight."

So that's who the "blessing" was for. "I'm just glad I *was* in time."

"Me, too," Rick said fervently. "You were right. You've been right all along, and we've been very wrong." He stroked my face. "I'm so sorry, little one. I'll make it up to you."

Tears stinging in my eyes, I said, "If Mom will let you."

"Don't worry—I'll handle your mother. And if she doesn't like it, she'll answer to me."

"Thanks," I whispered in his ear. I appreciated the sentiment, but knew it wouldn't be as easy as all that. And it would never be like it used to be. "Why don't you take Jen home? She's been through quite an ordeal." And so had he, though he wouldn't appreciate me mentioning it. "One of Ramirez's people will probably take you."

"Good idea. I'll do that."

As he led Jen off to find a ride, a released Fang jumped all over me, incoherent in his joy at seeing me safe.

Hey, you really love me.

YES. I MEAN NO—I AM SO TICKED AT YOU.

Dan was right behind Fang, and I wasn't sure I wanted to see his expression, so I bent down to pet Fang.

HOW DARE YOU LEAVE ME BEHIND? He licked my face thoroughly. DON'T YOU EVER DO IT AGAIN.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry for locking you in the car. But I was afraid you'd get hurt."

"Have you finished talking to everyone else?" Dan asked calmly.

Uh-oh, here it came. The inevitable tongue-lashing. I didn't answer, just straightened to meet his gaze.

His own face was tight and his eyes flashed with anger. "What the hell do you mean by going off without me? You could have been killed!"

I'd expected the anger, but not those words. Funny—he sounded just like Fang. "But I wasn't killed. Instead, I killed Lily. I'm so sorry, Dan." Even if he and his ex had broken up, there still had to be some feeling there.

"Don't apologize for that," Dan said sharply. "She wasn't human anymore. She was a monster."

So what must he think of *me*, who had enthralled everyone indiscriminately?

"Don't look at me like that," Dan said softly. "God, *you're* no monster."

So he was reading my mind now, huh? "Maybe, but I'm not human, either."

"What does that mean? If being human means acting with honor, integrity, and care for others, you're the most human person I know."

Could he mean that? "But . . . I was wrong about my power. I *can* force people—men—to do things."

Shockingly, Dan laughed. "Yeah. When you let loose, you really let loose."

I didn't understand his attitude. "But . . . it's not normal." Not human.

"No, but I doubt it will ever happen again. I know you had no choice, and I could tell you didn't have any idea of your full power before. As Micah said, it's because you've kept it pent up inside all these years. When you let loose, it was bound to be a hell of a ride."

He smiled at me. "And it gave me a whole new perspective on my earlier encounter with Lola. Will you forgive me?"

Stunned, I said, "Of course. So, you're okay with me and Lola now?"

"She's a part of you, one we'll have to learn to deal with together." He grinned. "Besides, every man should have a little Lola in his life. Partners?"

I grinned, allowing a little bit of happiness to sink in. Finally, someone who accepted me as I was—demon and all. This must be what Tessa meant about doing what I hated most to get what I wanted most.

"I'd love that."

Fang nosed me. HEY, WHAT ABOUT ME?

Try Me

As if he'd heard the hellhound, Dan added, "And Fang, too."

DAMN STRAIGHT. WE ARE SOOOO BAD. MONSTERS OF THE WORLD, WATCH OUT!

Dan put an arm around me. "Between the three of us—well, the four of us, including Lola—we make one hell of a team."

I beamed at him. Yeah—heaven help anyone who stood in our way.

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Try
Me



TRY ME

“Val, we have to make sure your inner demon isn’t hungry,” my cousin Micah said. “When was the last time you fed?”

Fed? I hated that word, hated the way it made me sound like one of the bloodsucking vampires I fought on San Antonio’s dark streets. “Uh, last night. I lost control a bit.”

“You can feed on Shade.”

Whoa. No way. I liked him.

My cute little hellhound spoke inside my mind. THAT’S THE POINT, BABE.

I glared down at Fang. “I can’t. It’s dangerous.”

“Really,” Shade said softly, “I don’t mind.” He took my hand, grounding himself in this reality, in me, so that he no longer flickered through a dozen different dimensions. Because of that, I could see the shadow demon’s features, though they were still partially hidden by his ever-present hood. Just as I remembered, he had shaggy blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and the face of an angel.

Lola, my inner demon, wanted him. So did I, for that matter.

Try Me

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Try Me

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Dedication

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Try Me

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead,) events or locations is entirely coincidental.



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Chapter One



I watched from the trees at the edge of the Texas graveyard, too cowardly to face the people who grieved for the woman I'd murdered. They thought she'd been killed in a car accident. They thought her life had been cut short by the whim of fate. They were wrong.

But I didn't plan on telling them anything different. They didn't really know her, didn't really know what she'd become. Let them keep their illusions.

I shivered as a soft breeze with a hint of chill ruffled my hair. Someone sobbed, and it seemed totally weird that the night should feel so serene, the San Antonio cemetery still so lush and green even in November, when the people around the grave were so sad and depressed.

Once darkness fell, the mourners finally left. Still, I hesitated in the shadow of the trees, rooted in place. It's not like Detective Dan Sullivan and I had a solid romance thing going on, but we *had* been more than friends and vampire-hunting partners. Now he was giving me the cold shoulder . . . just because I'd separated his girlfriend's head from her body?

His *ex*-girlfriend, I reminded myself. She and Dan had broken up even *before* she started dining on people. And he'd said I was right to decapitate her in order to rescue the rest of us, including my step-dad and baby sister. But still.

With just Fang and me in the cemetery, everything felt . . . more normal. We were used to working outside the rules of society. Of being alone, and at ease, in the darkness.

Fang—part hellhound, part scruffy terrier, and all snark—nudged me with his nose. VAL SHAPIRO, HEAP BIG VAMPIRE SLAYER, AFRAID OF A DEAD BODY? he mocked. C'MON, DO WHAT YA HAVE TO, SO WE CAN GET OUT OF HERE.

Did I mention the hellhound part allowed him to read my thoughts and speak in my mind? I was okay with the snarky comments most of the time, but sometimes, it was annoying. Like now.

I nudged him back, but refused to rise to his bait. I hadn't hesitated because I was afraid. I hesitated because I wasn't sure why I was here. What could I possibly accomplish?

Sighing and hoping to get a clue, I walked over to her grave. As I approached, the cloying fragrance of the lilies overpowered the scent of freshly turned soil and choked the air out of my lungs. "Lily Ann Armstrong," one trailing floral ribbon read. "Beloved daughter."

I felt like gagging. Partially because of the nauseating flowers, but mostly because of the sentiment. Beloved daughter? *Depraved fiend* was more like it. Or evil bloodsucker.

Yet someone had loved her, had mourned her passing. But why was I here? Was I here to acknowledge the fact of her existence, to admit that I'd lopped her head off with one stroke of my blade?

Tell me, what could you say to the grave of a woman you'd decapitated? *Hey, sorry I murdered you, but you deserved it?*

Fang snorted. THAT WASN'T MURDER. YOU CAN'T KILL THE UNDEAD—YOU JUST COMPLETE THE PROCESS.

He had a point. They thought Lily had died a few days ago at the age of twenty-five, but in reality, she'd died months before, when she'd made the decision to become a vampire. I hadn't killed Lily—she'd done that to herself, done the unthinkable to stay forever young, forever powerful, forever evil. Yes, she'd deserved it, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. After all, her hunger for power had put all of San Antonio in jeopardy, cost many lives, and almost cost me my family.

So why had I come? I'd never visited the graves of my other vampire kills. Why was this one different? Because my partner, Dan Sullivan, had once cared for her?

I didn't even know how I felt. Happy she was gone, sorry I hadn't caught her sooner . . . what?

Fang leaned against me, compassion in his big brown eyes. IT'S OKAY TO GRIEVE. BUT ARE YOU GRIEVING FOR HER . . . OR YOURSELF?

Good question. Because of Lily, I'd come into my power and unleashed Lola—the succubus lust demon inside me. I still felt mildly connected to the men I'd enthralled three nights ago, still fizzing with the energy I'd absorbed from them. The past three days, I'd felt more vibrantly alive than in my entire eighteen years of existence.

It was exhilarating . . . yet scary, too. I'd fought against letting my demon free my whole life, but because of Lily, I'd been forced to let the succubus loose to save the people I loved. Thanks to Lily, I now knew what I'd been fighting against, knew how tempting ultimate power was, how powerful it made me. It made me understand her in a way I hadn't before. She'd felt this seductive power, too, and had given in.

But I never wanted to be like her, never wanted to give in to the demon inside me. It meant a lifetime of battle between the two sides of my nature, but I was determined to come out on top.

So, yes, I grieved. For both of us.

THAT'S OKAY, Fang said, rubbing up against my leg. IT MAKES YOU HUMAN.

Whoa. For some reason, that really got me, and I felt a huge wave of relief wash through my body. Yes, I was human. Only one-eighth of me was demon. Not enough to make me a monster, no matter how my mother looked at me.

“Thanks,” I said simply.

Fang grinned. NO PROBLEM. NOW, CAN WE GO KILL ANOTHER ONE?

I laughed, just as he’d intended. It was what the Special Crimes Unit hired us to do, what I was good at, my reason for existence. “Sure, let’s—”

I broke off as Fang stared beyond me, wagging his tail. I turned around and smiled at the man who approached. Even in the dark I could sense his good looks. With dark wavy hair that curled around his ears, full lips, and a dancer’s body, Micah Blackburn was the type of guy that girls drooled over. Everyone but me, that was. My succubus demon cancelled out his incubus, and he was the only guy I could be physically close to without having to worry about Lola getting all touchy-feely. He was kinda like the older brother I never had. We were probably related somewhere along the line, so I considered him my cousin.

Too bad I didn’t look like him, though. He was a total hottie while I was . . . so not. Blah brown hair, blah brown eyes, average height. Ordinary—that’s me. On the outside, anyway. Inside, I was totally *extraordinary*. If I could figure out how to swap the inside for the outside, I’d do it in a nanosecond.

Micah smiled. “I thought you might be here.”

“Why?” I hadn’t known I was coming myself.

“Lieutenant Ramirez mentioned the funeral. I figured you’d feel the need for closure.”

Closure. Muscles I hadn’t realized were tense relaxed as I realized Micah had nailed it. I’d come for closure. And now, with the finality of her burial, I had it. I could let go of it all. “Yeah, I guess. Why did you track me down? Why didn’t you just call?”

“I did.”

“Oh, I forgot. I turned the phone off so it wouldn’t ring in the middle of the funeral. “I pulled it out and checked it. Sure enough—two calls from Micah, none from Dan or Lt. Ramirez. Damn.

“What’s the matter?” Micah asked.

I shrugged and plopped down on the grass and sat there cross-legged, staring at the ground to avoid his knowing eyes.

Micah joined me, sinking down and looking all loose-limbed and graceful. Wistfully, I wished that was one of the traits of being our kind of demon. But no, it was just Micah.

“Want to talk about it?” he asked.

“Not really.” But I knew he’d bug me until I spilled my guts. As the leader of San Antonio’s Demon Underground, Micah had an over-developed sense of responsibility for anyone in his organization. And that included me . . . and Fang.

Fang snuggled against me. YEP. MIGHT AS WELL SPILL IT NOW AND GET IT OVER WITH. IF YOU DON’T, I WILL.

The hellhound could read the mind of anyone who was part-demon or part-vampire, and project his thoughts into theirs if he chose. Usually, I was the only one he chose to share with. Lucky me.

HEY, Fang protested, DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE READING THE MIND OF MOST VAMPIRES AND DEMONS? LIKE WADING IN A CESSPOOL. NO THANKS.

Gee, I guess I should be flattered.

YOU BETCHA.

Micah stared into my face. “Val?”

I sighed. “It’s nothing.”

IT’S SOMETHING, Fang corrected, making it clear he was communicating to both of us. TELL HIM.

“Okay, okay. Ramirez told me to take a few days off after I . . . stopped . . . Lily.”

“Because you killed Dan’s former fiancée?”

“No, because I let Lola fully free for the first time.”

Micah nodded. “Oh, of course.”

“Yeah. He wasn’t sure I could handle it.” Heck, *I* wasn’t sure I could handle it. And though Lola had been fully satisfied for the first time in my life, it didn’t mean she was content to lie back and bask in the feeling. Far from it. Instead, she seemed to want more and more all the time. “You were right,” I admitted. “I should have been feeding her a little bit of lust all along. It would’ve been a lot easier to handle now.” For years, I hadn’t let her feed at all. I’d starved her, then suddenly let her gorge to her heart’s content. In hindsight, neither was a good decision.

Micah shook his head, looking exasperated. “I told you before, there is no Lola, no separate demon inside you. It’s part of *you*.”

“I know, I know. It’s just easier to think of my demon nature as a separate person inside me.” Someone to blame my urges on, someone else to take the fall for the lust I had a problem controlling. Too weird that I had men lusting after me all the time and I was still a virgin. “Leave me some illusions, will ya?”

“All right, but tell me what’s wrong.”

“No biggie. I got bored, tired of having nothing to do.” When Micah continued waiting patiently, I admitted softly, “Okay, I’ve been waiting for Dan to call, just to reassure me he hasn’t had second thoughts about me. That he doesn’t think I’m a monster, and he doesn’t blame me for enthralling him and everyone else.” And to check out that spark, that closeness we’d felt immediately afterward. “He hasn’t called.”

YEAH, Fang said. ALL SHE DOES IS MOPE.

“Do not.” I paced a lot, too.

So, I’d gotten on my Valkyrie motorcycle, plopped Fang in his seat on the back and driven off to blow the cobwebs out of my brain. Somehow, I’d ended up here, at the gravesite of the woman who still complicated my life even in her death.

Micah gave me a one-armed hug. “I thought Dan was fine with . . . Lola.”

I leaned into the hug, and slipped my arms around his waist, laying my head on his shoulder, feeling warmth suffuse me at the rare contact with a person of the male persuasion. “I thought so, too. But maybe it was just a side-effect of the spell Lola cast over him.”

“Maybe,” Micah murmured. “But don’t worry, he’ll come around.”

I wasn’t so sure, but a demon girl could hope . . . “Thanks, I—”

Fang suddenly spun around, his eyes flashing purple. VAMPIRES, he snarled, and leapt toward the three onrushing forms.

Lola surged to the fore. I scrambled to my feet and whipped out one of the stakes I kept tucked in my jeans’ back waistband. As the first vamp jumped at me, his hands outstretched and fangs gleaming, I stabbed him right in the heart. He dropped like a rock.

Fang had the female vamp engaged so I turned to check on Micah. He wasn’t doing so well. He’d never made it off the ground and was pinned by a vamp who was sinking fangs into his neck. Terrified, I grabbed another stake. “Go fang yourself, buster.” I plunged the stake into the fangbanger’s back as hard as I could.

It was enough to pierce his heart and he dropped on top of Micah.

A LITTLE HELP HERE, Fang yelled.

He’d harried the female vamp and kept her occupied, but though he was part hellhound, she still outweighed him six to one. As she lifted her foot to kick him, I tackled her and punched her in the face as hard as I could. Her neck snapped back and she hit the ground. She looked surprised.

It felt good, so I dropped down on top of her, straddled her waist and hit her again. And again and again.

ENOUGH, Fang yelled in my mind. YOU WHUPPED HER GOOD. STOP ALREADY.

His sarcasm got to me. I stopped, fist upraised, and stared down at the vamp whose face was beaten, battered, and bloody. Repulsed, I let my arm drop. Had I done that?

Fang dropped a fallen branch by my hand. JUST KILL HER ALREADY.

Yes, that was my job—taking out the bloodsuckers who preyed on humans. Not beating the crap out of them like the monster some thought me. Before the vamp could recover, I snatched up the branch and, using both hands, stabbed it down so hard I pinned her to the ground. She stiffened, then lay still, well and truly dead.

FEEL BETTER NOW?

Actually, I did. “Shut up,” I muttered and felt the sizzle in my blood cool a bit. Lola had gotten her jollies with one kind of lust anyway, so she was happy. *Glad someone is*, I thought, annoyed at myself. I got to my feet to check on Micah.

He had rolled the vamp off of him and was sitting up, wide-eyed, holding a hand to his neck.

“You okay?” I asked.

Micah nodded. “Yes, thanks to the two of you.” He removed his hand from his neck. The bite mark was very shallow, so the vamp hadn’t gotten started, thank goodness. I wondered idly why they were here, then realized they had probably come to pay their respects to Lily, former leader of San Antonio’s bad-ass vamps. San Antonio, land of the Alamo, cowboys, barbecue, and the undead. Well, they could pay their respects in person now—in hell.

Speaking of which . . . I pulled a GPS locator out of my pocket and activated it so one of the city’s secret Special Crimes Unit pick-up units would come to dispose of the dead vamps. After I’d done my duty, I studied Micah more closely. Though it was rather dark, my enhanced senses allowed me to see him clearly. He looked really shocked.

“Never fought a vamp before?” I guessed.

He glanced up at me. “No. They’re so much faster and stronger, I try to avoid it.”

I glanced down at the dead undead who’d almost fanged Micah and was surprised to see how slight he was. Micah must outweigh the vamp by a good thirty pounds. Why hadn’t he been able to fight the bloodsucker off?

As I helped Micah to his feet, he added, “I don’t know how you do it—you’re as good as they are. Rick must have been one great trainer. You’re not even breathing hard.”

True, my stepfather had been an excellent martial arts trainer, but speed and strength came naturally to me. There’d been no need to teach me *that*. “You mean, you’re not as good as they are?”

He laughed without mirth. “Of course not. I’m only one-eighth incubus, like you. The only thing I could do is enthrall them . . . and only if they’re female.” He glanced at me curiously. “Why didn’t you do that to the two males?”

Because I’d tried my whole life to avoid using my succubus powers to control men. I’d grown up with a mother who never forgave my part-demon father for enthralling her. “I didn’t think about it, I just reacted.” But . . . why hadn’t Micah been able to fight off a baby vamp?

Fang frowned up at me. GOOD QUESTION.

My expression must have looked as odd as I felt, because Micah asked, “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Don’t you . . . have super strength, reflexes, senses, and healing ability?”

He paused in brushing off his pants, looking surprised. “No. Do you?”

“Yeah, I thought you knew that. You mean that’s *not* part of being a lust demon?”

“Not so far as I know.”

Fang stared at me. HOLY CRAP, BATMAN. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

“I have no idea.” My mind raced as I struggled to understand what Micah had revealed. Why *was* I so much stronger and faster than him?

“It’s possible . . .” Micah hesitated.

“What? Tell me.”

He looked apologetic. “I personally don’t know of any, but it’s possible that you are descended from more than one type of demon.”

“*What?*” Stunned, I asked, “What other kind of demon?”

“I have no idea. We lost a lot of knowledge when we lost the *Encyclopedia Magicka*.”

IT’S NOT LOST, Fang said. VAL HAS IT.

It was Micah’s turn to say, “*What?*”

“I have it,” I confirmed. “I didn’t know anyone was looking for it.”

“All three books?”

I nodded. “My father gave them to me for my fifth birthday.” *Right before he killed himself in despair over being a demon*, I didn’t say out loud. .

Micah goggled at me. “So that’s where they went. We’ve been looking for those books for years, struggling in the dark, trying to find clues to our demon nature whenever we could. And you’ve had them all along?”

He looked indignant, but I held up my hands in surrender. “Hey, I didn’t know he *stole* them. You can have them back, no problem.” It was the least I could do after Micah had made me feel so welcome. Besides, they really belonged to him, since my father had probably stolen them from Micah’s father.

He relaxed and ran a hand over his face. “I’m sorry, but you have no idea how much having those books would have helped us over the past thirteen years. It’s the only known copy of the encyclopedia in existence.”

Fang rolled his eyes. EVER HEAR OF A SCANNER? OR A COPY MACHINE?

Micah grinned ruefully. “Good point. But my father probably didn’t want to make it too easy for others to steal—the information can be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“Dangerous how? You mean because it reveals our weaknesses?”

“Yes, but that’s just the first volume. The other two . . .” He gave me a quizzical look. “Did you read the other two?”

“No—I didn’t read much at all.” I shrugged. “I figured they were just more books on magick, maybe a little more accurate than most.” After all, I’d been around lots of them at Mom and Rick’s New Age bookstore. And I wasn’t much of a reader—action was more my thing.

“And you didn’t feel any . . . *pull* from the books?”

“No. Should I?”

“I guess not. My father didn’t explain that real well, but I definitely got the impression there was something dangerous about possessing volumes two and three. They’re about the old magicks, ones no one uses anymore. I’ll be glad to get them back, so I can keep them safe.”

“I’ll bring them over to you right away, I promise.”

It dawned on me we were *chatting* there in the dark, in a cemetery, with Lily buried nearby in two pieces—her head and the rest of her—and the gape-eyed corpses of three vamps sprawled around us. I shrugged. No biggie. All in a day’s work.

“I appreciate it.” Micah snapped his fingers. “That reminds me. The reason I’ve been trying to find you is because I want to make sure you come to the social. You can bring the books to me then.”

I grimaced. “I’m not feeling very social right now.” And I didn’t know many people in the Demon Underground.

“You should come. Eat, drink, get to know other part-demons like yourself.”

“Why don’t you guys just start a chat room? Or friend each other on Facebook?”

IT’S OKAY, Fang assured me. I’VE BEEN AND IT’S FUN. YOU CAN BE YOURSELF WITH NO BLOOD, MAYHEM, OR VAMPIRES BEATEN TO A BLOODY PULP.

I glared at him, but he ignored me.

Micah added, “Oh, and the New Blood Movement wants to discuss something with us, too, so some of them are coming as well.”

I grimaced. I hadn’t seen Alejandro or his vampire followers since I’d lopped Lily’s head off and stained his pristine rug. He’d *said* he was cool with that, but . . .

Oh, well, might as well get it over with. “Uh, okay. When is it again?”

He checked his watch. “In about an hour, at the club. I’ve closed it to the public tonight.”

“Okay, I’ll come and bring the books. Maybe you can help me look through them to find out why I have these abilities and you don’t.”

Micah shook my hand. "It's a deal."

The SCU pick-up unit, disguised as an ambulance, drove up then. Micah left, and I helped the staff load the un-dead remains. Then I headed home to the townhouse I shared with Dan's sister, wondering what freaky thing would happen next. It had been a hell of a week, and the revelation that I might have *two* demons inside me made me tired and confused.

Fang nudged me. DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT, KIDDO. YOU'RE STILL VAL.

Yes, but until an hour ago, I'd thought I knew myself pretty well. Now I had no idea who . . . or what . . . or how many of me . . . I really was.

Try Me

Chapter Two



Fang and I went to the townhouse to stock up again on stakes and holy water—just in case—and I put the heavy books of the encyclopedia in a backpack. My friend and landlord, Dan’s sister, Gwen, a nurse, wasn’t there to ask questions, thank goodness. She worked the night shift at the hospital.

My cell rang as we were about to head out, and I checked the number. Nope, not Dan. It was my stepfather. Sighing, I answered, “Hello, Rick.”

“Hello, sweetheart. How’s everything going?”

“Okay.” Fang snorted, but I ignored him. “Everyone there okay?”

“Wonderful, thanks to you. Jen and I owe you our lives and—”

I cut him off. “You don’t have to keep thanking me. Once was enough.” Besides, that’s what family did for each other.

“Sorry. I just meant that I’ve been talking to your mother, and she’s grateful, too.”

“Uh huh,” I said noncommittally, as Fang rolled his eyes. We both believed Mom was happy that her husband and favorite daughter had been saved . . . but I wasn’t so sure she was glad *I* was the one to do it. She’d always blamed me for being a bad influence on Jen. It’s why she’d kicked me out of the house and made me live on my own the day I turned eighteen. I’d been lucky to connect with Fang, Dan, his sister, and a job with the San Antonio P.D.

“No, really,” Rick said. “I’m calling to invite you to Thanksgiving dinner.”

I hesitated. A week ago, I would have been thrilled to be invited back into the fold. But now . . . I wasn’t sure. I stuck my hand in my pocket and hunched my shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m still not sure I’m welcome.” They were all

fully human. I'd finally accepted that I'm not. Fully human, that is. The whole time I was growing up, Mom had made me feel like a freak. I wasn't sure I wanted to go back.

His voice softened. "Really, Val, she's mellowed. She's even hired one of Micah's people at the store."

"You mean she'll actually have another part-demon around Jen?" *Just as long as the part-demon isn't me, huh?*

"Yeah, well, but Jen doesn't like him."

Fang snorted. THAT EXPLAINS A LOT. IF BABY SISTER DOESN'T LIKE HIM, MOM ASSUMES HE CAN'T BE A BAD INFLUENCE ON HER.

True. And it might deter Jen's unhealthy fascination with all things vamp and demony. Mom wasn't being altruistic—she was covering her butt. After seeing how naïve Jen was about Alejandro and the other vamps, I couldn't blame her. "I don't know, Rick. I might spend Thanksgiving with Micah and the others."

Rick sighed. "I know they probably feel more like family right now than we do."

"Not really, but at least they don't carp at me and blame me for everything wrong in their lives like Mom does."

"I understand, but Jen and I want you here, and your mother promised to behave."

I grimaced. Why couldn't she just want me to come home 'cause I'm her daughter, too? Selfishly, I wanted her to *want* me there.

But that obviously wasn't going to happen. "I don't—"

"Think about it, Val. Thanksgiving is three weeks away. Really, I think this could bring the two of you back together."

Fang eyed me. DON'T DO IT. YOU KNOW YOU'LL REGRET IT.

He was probably right, but Mom, Rick and Jen were the only human family I had. Hedging, I said, "I'll think about it."

"Good, good." Rick sounded relieved. "We'll count on you being here."

I made a noncommittal noise and changed the subject. "Hey, did Mom ever mention anything about my father being more than one kind of demon?"

"No." Rick sounded surprised. "Why?"

"No reason. I'm just, uh, trying to learn more about my uh . . . heritage, you know?"

"Sorry, she never mentioned anything else about him. Want me to ask her?"

"Sure, if you would." Mom was the only connection I had to my father's demon ancestry. If I have any close relatives on his side, they'd never made themselves known to me. But she might know.

“Okay, will do. Or you could ask her yourself . . .”

I grimaced. Yeah, right. Loads of fun, talking to Mom about her unwanted demon in-laws. “Hey, listen, gotta go. I have a thing.”

“Okay, sweetheart. See you soon.”

He hung up and Fang nosed me. DO YOU REALLY WANT TO SEE MOMMY DEAREST AGAIN?

“Not really.” But there was something deep inside that longed to be a kid again, playing with my sister, training with Rick, baking cookies with Mom . . .

. . . BEING TREATED LIKE CRAP, LIKE YOU’RE SUB-HUMAN, BEING HIDDEN AWAY FROM THE WORLD LIKE YOU’RE A FREAK . . .

I winced. Fang was right. Unless I could somehow rip out the demon part of me, my mother was never going to love me like she did her fully human daughter. I sighed. It was her problem, not mine, and I’d learned to deal.

EVEN BETTER, YOU HAVE A NEW LIFE OF YOUR OWN. AND ME.

I laughed and hugged him. “True. Let’s get going so we don’t miss the party.”



Fang and I cruised down to San Antonio’s famous River Walk on my Valkyrie, looking forward to the restaurants and crowds and romantic atmosphere, relaxing in the balmy autumn evening. I parked the Valkyrie and Fang and I walked down the stone steps. Tourists and locals mixed freely on both sides of the narrow, jade-green river, strolling hand in hand, or chatting and laughing over meals under bright umbrellas. The little twinkling lights in the trees overhanging the river made it seem somehow magical . . . in a good way. The River Walk always seemed to me like a lost world in a bubble of its own, far removed from ordinary reality. Or at least, certainly something I never knew as ordinary.

But despite being in my favorite place, I couldn’t help but speculate on what other kind of demon might be lurking within me. It was hard not to wonder . . . and worry.

RELAX, Fang said. MAYBE THERE’S MORE THAN ONE WAY TO BE A LUST DEMON. MAYBE YOUR PHYSICAL STRENGTH IS INHERITED FROM YOUR FAMILY AND NOT MICAH’S. NO BIG.

“Maybe not for you . . .” What if it was something else? Like there was a demon time bomb set to go off in my body or something.

OBSCESS MUCH?

“Maybe I have good reason.”

AND MAYBE YOU DON’T. DID YOU READ ABOUT ANYTHING LIKE THAT IN THE ENCYCLOPEDIA MAGICKA?

No, but I hadn't read that much of it, and I didn't remember reading about anyone having a mixture of demons inside them. What happened when two types of demons mingled?

YOU GET VAL SHAPIRO, Fang said. NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT.

I grinned down at the hellhound. He did know how to make me feel better.

Ignoring the "Closed" sign at Micah's place, Club Purgatory, Fang and I entered through the front. A man at the podium glanced at us then waved us in. "They're in the Ladies Lounge," he said.

Fang sniffed the air. THERE'S ANOTHER DOG HERE. COOL—SOMEONE MY OWN SIZE.

He bounded up the stairs, and I followed. The club looked so different with the lights turned up. Not as dark and mysterious. No crowds of swooning women watching Micah dance. Instead, the purgatory flame and devil theme seemed a little theatrical and hokey under the bright lights.

When I entered the lounge, I saw that someone—probably Micah's assistant, Tessa—had made an attempt to decorate for the party, with streamers, balloons, and floral centerpieces on all the tables. But thankfully, no stupid party hats. Could you imagine demons wearing pointy pieces of cardboard snugged with elastic under their chins? *Not*.

The room was full of people of all shapes, sizes, age, and ethnicity. All colors and creeds of human being could be part-demon. And most of them looked entirely normal . . . though a good sprinkling of them showed evidence of their mixed family trees.

I was used to them, now. I didn't even blink at the sight of small horns peeking from their hair, or purple skin, or vaporish clouds where their faces should be.

Fang immediately followed his nose to the other side of the room, and I smiled at Micah, who came to greet me. He glanced at the backpack. "You have the books?" he asked eagerly.

"Yep."

I handed them over. He unzipped the backpack and peered inside. "Excellent." He glanced around and beckoned Tessa over. She looked even more elfin than normal in this lighting. Not that she was an actual elf. At least, not so far as I knew. Tessa's claim to demon fame was subtle. She went into trances and uttered mysterious prophecies. "Could you put these in the office and lock the door, please?" Micah asked.

Tessa smiled a greeting at me. "Sure." She hefted the backpack. "That's strange . . . I didn't know I'd be able to feel the magick."

"You can?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes. Can't you?"

"Uh, no. Guess I'm not sensitive enough."

Tessa shrugged and took off with the backpack, but now that I didn't have anything to hold onto, I wasn't quite sure what to do with my hands . . . or the rest of me. I hadn't attended many parties in my lonely life, so I stood there, feeling like a total loser.

Micah must have sensed my geekiness, because he gestured toward the bar. "There's food and drink over there. Have some, then mingle, get to know folks."

"Uh, are there some . . . manners or customs or whatever, that I should know?" I didn't want to screw up or anything. *Please, give me directions on how to navigate this foreign land.*

"One thing—in the Demon Underground, it's considered bad manners to ask someone what *kind* of demon they are. Unless they choose to tell you themselves, of course."

"Then how do you know the ones who look like regular humans really are part-demon?"

"To belong to the Demon Underground, they have to register with us and demonstrate their abilities, so I know their background."

"I don't remember registering."

"You didn't have to—your father did it for you, when you were born."

"Oh." That made sense.

A couple more people came in the door, and he waved me on. "Go, meet and mingle. Come see me afterward, and we'll go through the magick books. See if we can find out more about what other kind of demon might be in your background."

Easier said than done. I glanced around, but wasn't sure how to start mingling, since even Fang had deserted me. Thirsty, I decided to do as Micah suggested and headed for the bar to get a Coke. An attractive middle-aged Hispanic woman smiled at me as I picked up a glass. She looked like someone's mother, and I couldn't imagine what kind of racy demon she might house. She held out her hand. "Hi. You must be Val. I'm Maria Ramirez."

As I shook her hand, I wondered how she knew me. Then the significance of her last name struck me. "The lieutenant's wife?" I asked.

"Yes—Juan has told me so much about you."

Juan? Sheesh, I hadn't thought of my boss having a first name. I laughed nervously. "All good, I hope."

She smiled. "Of course, though I understand you're going through a bit of a rough time right now. If you ever want to talk . . ."

I stared down into my Coke, not sure what to say. "Thanks. I'm good."

She patted my hand. "Well, give me a call if you change your mind. Juan can give you the number." Maria pointed to the far corner. "I think someone is trying to get your attention."

I glanced up and realized she was right. Someone stood up and waved at me. Deep hoodie hiding his inhuman face, gloves hiding his hands . . . it had to be Shade. Good—someone I knew. I smiled and waved back then glanced hesitantly at Maria, not wanting to seem rude.

“Go ahead,” she said. “It’ll do you good to be with people your own age.”

I thanked her and headed toward the corner. As I neared the guy who’d waved at me, I asked uncertainly, “Shade?”

He tipped back his hood for a moment and I saw the dark ribbons of light swirling in the space where his face should be. Yep, it was Shade all right. You could only see a shadow demon’s features if his skin was touching someone else’s. Then he looked totally normal, or rather, totally hot. I was kind of surprised Shade hid under his hood here, but maybe his lack of ordinary human features made even part-demons uncomfortable.

He was sitting at a table with four other people, and they brought up another chair and scooted around to make space for me next to Shade. “Val, these are my friends,” he said. He introduced them, and I tried to remember their names. The guy with the wavy blond hair and wide smile was Josh, and the quiet, brooding redhead was named Andrew. I reined Lola in tightly to keep her from flirting with the two guys. I turned toward the girls. The dark-haired Emo girl with the geeky clothes and glowing violet eyes asked to be called *Mood* and the other girl, Shawndra, had green hair, pale skin, and tons of piercings.

I felt a familiar canine nose nudge my knee, through my jeans. AND THIS, Fang said, IS PRINCESS.

I glanced down to see a beautiful little dog gazing up at me with her big, brown eyes. HELLO. I AM A PUREBRED CAVALIER KING CHARLES SPANIEL. YOU MAY PET ME.

I raised my eyebrows at her diva attitude, but scratched her smooth, silky ears as directed.

“You found another part-hellhound dog?” I asked Fang. But the answer was obviously *Yes*. An ordinary canine would have shied away from demons and wouldn’t have been able to speak in my mind. She’s not *quite* purebred, I thought with amusement.

YEAH. ISN’T SHE GORGEOUS? Fang stared at her in admiration, obviously smitten.

“Stunning,” I confirmed with a smirk.

Apparently satisfied by my recognition of her beauty, Princess laid down at Shade’s feet, and Fang cuddled up next to her with a mental sigh of admiration.

Amused, I glanced at Shade. “Is she yours?”

I BELONG TO MYSELF, Princess said indignantly.

Oops. “I should have asked if Shade is your human servant,” I said dryly.

Princess sniffed. THAT IS NOT AMUSING. HOWEVER, YES, I AM CURRENTLY RESIDING WITH THE SHADOW DEMON.

Shade spread his hands. “When I met Fang, I realized there might be more like him, so I went looking. I found Princess holding court in the county shelter. No one else dared adopt her.” Though I couldn’t see his face, I could hear the laughter in his voice.

YOU DIDN’T CHOOSE ME. I CHOSE YOU, Princess said.

Shade rubbed her head. “You did indeed.” He sounded very pleased about it. I grinned, too, glad that it gave us something else in common.

“How come we haven’t seen you around before?” Andrew asked me. He said it with a smile, but it sounded like more of a challenge.

Shawndra bumped him with her shoulder. “Hey, don’t be rude.” Her speech sounded clear, though I wondered how she managed with the piercings in her lips and tongue

Determined not to stare, I turned to Andrew and shrugged. “No biggie. I just didn’t know you guys existed.”

He scowled. “Now who’s being rude?”

Huh? “No, I didn’t mean it that way—”

Shade interrupted. “She just learned about the Demon Underground about a week or so ago. But she’s one of us, now. Aren’t you, Val?”

Was I? “I guess,” I said doubtfully. Though I wondered how many of them were surly, like Andrew. If only they were more like Josh, who seemed content to watch and smile. Mood glanced at him, too, and I was surprised to see the naked longing in her eyes. A longing that Josh seemed clueless about.

She flushed when I caught her at it, then leaned back in her chair, pretending to be bored. “Don’t mind Andrew. He’s been a jerk lately.”

“That’s not fair,” Shawndra protested. “You know he has a good reason.”

Mood gave them a lazy smile beneath glowing violet eyes. “Yeah, and I could help with that.”

“No thanks,” Andrew said. “I’ll pass.”

A murmur ran through the crowd. I turned to see Micah walking onto the stage with a microphone. Embarrassment flickered through me. The last time I’d seen him up there, the lights had been low, and he’d been dancing and getting the ladies in the audience all hot and bothered, feeding his incubus with their lust for him. But he was in street clothes now and obviously playing host and leader, not sexy dancer. I relaxed.

Once he had everyone’s attention, Micah said, “Before I introduce our guest, I’d like to make an announcement. Thanks to Val Shapiro, the *Encyclopedia Magicka* has finally been returned to us.”

Cheers erupted around the room and Andrew gave me a grim smile. “Good job, Val.”

I felt my face warm as everyone turned to look at me.

As if he sensed my embarrassment, Micah continued. “But that’s not why we’re here tonight. I know we’ve spoken before about the New Blood Movement, and how they are trying to improve their reputation by creating blood banks where humans can donate blood and vampires can receive the sustenance they need without harming humans.”

“Yeah, right,” Andrew muttered. “Real altruistic.”

Couldn’t say I disagreed with him. In theory, the donations were as sterile as donating to a hospital’s blood bank. But in reality, most donations were the lurid, fang-to-neck kind, with the human getting a real thrill along with it. Since vamps could enthrall a human’s mind, they could make sure the human thoroughly enjoyed the process . . . and came back for more. A recipe for trouble, and sleazy at best.

But I had to admit the New Blood Movement was providing a service. At least it kept the bloodsuckers in line.

Most of them, anyway. Some, like the ones I’d staked earlier this evening, enjoyed the fear and terror of their victims too much to line up for snacks like drug addicts trading their highs for rehab meds.

Micah continued, “Alejandro is the leader of the New Blood Movement, and he’s asked to speak to you tonight.”

Alejandro strode in from the wings, handsome, confident, charismatic. Dressed all in black with long dark hair and caramel-colored skin, the vampire exuded magnetism. Strangely enough, he wasn’t using his vampire nature to enthrall everyone. It just came naturally to him.

Alejandro accepted the mic from Micah and made a sweeping gesture with his other arm. “Thank you all for welcoming us,” he said with just a trace of a Spanish accent.

Us? I realized then that there were vamps in the crowd, sort of mingling, but more hanging out in small clumps around the room.

“As Micah said, the New Blood Movement is designed to make it safe for humans to walk the streets of San Antonio without fearing those of my kind.”

“What about the bloodsuckers who don’t belong to your organization?” someone yelled.

Alejandro smiled. “An excellent question. Many of ‘the lone ones,’ as we call them, were misled by my former lieutenant, Lily, who betrayed us in the interest of obtaining power.”

More muttering, and more than a few sidelong glances at me. I guess they all knew the story. Among San Antonio’s vamps I was known as the notorious *Slayer*.

“Yes,” Alejandro continued, “The Slayer eliminated the threat, and we are attempting to contact Lily’s other followers to bring them within the fold. But there is one way in which you can help us.”

“How?” someone shouted.

“Why would we want to?” came another voice.

Obviously, Alejandro had anticipated these questions, for he continued smoothly to explain how they planned to announce their existence to the world. The vamps had friends in high places who were prepared to put legislation in place to require all vampires to subscribe to the creed of the New Blood Movement. Those who did would be afforded protection under the law. Those who didn't would forfeit any rights they might have. In other words, the vamps in this part of the Lone Star State would be treated as extremists. They could either live as peaceful citizens or be hunted like terrorists.

Alejandro nodded at Micah. "Your leader, here, wants your existence to remain a secret, but it doesn't have to be that way. You part-demons can choose to stand beside us vampires as we make this announcement. Together we can make sure the state of Texas extends the same legal protections to all of us in the . . . shall we say . . . in the 'alternate non-human lifestyles' community."

There was silence, along with a general uneasiness, as people digested this. I knew it was hard to believe in altruistic vampires, but I'd been inside the minds of the leaders of the Movement and knew they were telling the truth. I even admired them for it, though I wasn't so sure outing themselves—and us—would be as easy as they thought.

"Micah's right," a deep voice boomed. "We don't want to be exposed. And you vampires shouldn't push the issue. It's suicidal."

I could understand his viewpoint, too. If vampires came out of the closet, it was only a short leap for humans to confirm that demons existed as well. Imagine the terror, the ignorance, the Salem-like "demon trials." The whole point of the Demon Underground was to help demons blend into the human population quietly, help them find jobs and pass for human so they wouldn't be persecuted.

I heard nervous mutterings all the way around the room, and one guy jumped on stage to say it. "We don't want to be recognized as demons," he shouted. Huge, with a chest the size of a barrel and a face that looked as if it had seen one too many fights, the man-mountain thrust his pugnacious face into Alejandro's. "We aren't asking for special rights; just to be treated like everyone else. I see where you'd benefit, with all that free blood and all," he said in the deep voice that boomed out. "But what's in it for *us*? Sounds to me like you'll expose *us* to ridicule and discrimination."

Unperturbed, the vampire leader turned to face the distrustful audience. "Not at all. You're a peaceful people and have lived harmoniously among the general population for many years. It will not be difficult to convince people that you mean them no harm."

Yeab, right, I thought. And we'd all frolic with bunnies and rainbows forever. Riiiiight.

"Ridiculous," one demon shouted. "Your daydreams will get us all killed." He shoved the vampire next to him.

The vampire shoved back, and soon vampires and demons were knocking over chairs, leaping to their feet, and tussling around the room.

Fang scooted farther under the table. I'M STAYING OUTTA THIS.

Good plan. In my mind, there were no bad guys here. They were all trying to do the right thing. Of course, Lola perked up at the violence and testosterone permeating the air, and for a moment I thought about letting her loose. It

would be so easy to capture every man here, so easy to enthrall them, bend them to my will, be a hero, stop this violence . . .

. . . FEED ON ALL THEIR LOVELY SEXUAL ENERGY, Fang countered.

True. Lola's intentions weren't exactly altruistic. I sighed and forcibly reined her back in. After all, Micah could have easily done the same to the women in the room, and it was obvious he hadn't.

Oh, crap. In a demon-versus-vampire rumble, who would come out on top? I didn't want my friends, including Micah and Shade, to get hurt in this turf war. My stomach clenched. How could I stop this?

Try Me

Chapter Three



Suddenly, I felt waves of calm and serenity flowing out to the crowd. I glanced up on stage and saw Alejandro standing there, his arms wide as he willed the rumble to calm. Mood jumped up on our table. Her eyes flashed a deep purple as she spread her arms to mirror him, receiving his waves of reassurance and amplifying them, sending them out to the crowd.

Though people quieted, they did it with resentment, even as they realized that peacemakers from both sides were making with the sweetness and light.

Once the tension in the room had calmed down, Alejandro and Micah both apologized to each other and asked the demons to reconsider the proposal when they'd calmed down.

Chastised, everyone gathered their things to leave. The other demons at our table had disappeared during the fray, but Shade offered Mood a hand to help her down from the table. "That was effective," he said.

She shrugged. "It's what I do."

Suddenly I remembered reading about mood demons in the *Encyclopedia Magicka*. They could enhance emotions, amplify them to people all around them. Thank goodness, Mood chose to amplify serenity instead of fear or terror. I looked at her with new respect.

Remembering Micah's request that I talk with him after the party, I hung around as he conferred earnestly with the brawny demon who'd jumped up on stage to yell at Alejandro. His name was Ludwig, someone said. Fang continued to woo Princess while we waited for the crowd to disperse.

Finally, when there were only a few demons left, I approached Micah. "You still okay with us browsing the encyclopedia together?" I asked. "I understand if you want to postpone it until later."

He shook his head tiredly. “No, that’s okay. I’m good. Let’s go to my office.”

He beckoned to Tessa, and we followed him to his office. He unlocked the door, and I glanced around. “Where’d you put the books?” I asked Tessa.

She unlocked a drawer of Micah’s plain wooden desk. “Right here . . .” She looked puzzled. The drawer was empty. “I know I put them here,” Tessa insisted.

Swiftly, she pulled out Micah’s chair and looked under the desk, then yanked open the other drawers and looked inside. “Where are the books?”

Oh, no . . .

All three of us searched every inch of the office. No luck.

Micah slumped in his chair and ran a hand over his face. “They’re gone,” he whispered in defeat. “Someone must have taken them.”

“I’m so sorry,” Tessa said, looking stricken. “I locked the door and the drawers. I thought it would be enough.”

“It’s not your fault,” Micah assured her.

Fang appeared by my side. THIS IS SO NOT GOOD.

That was an understatement. “Who would take them?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Someone who knew they were here,” Micah said. “And, since I stupidly announced their existence to the entire audience, everyone knew.”

Tessa nodded. “Including Alejandro and his vampires.”

“You don’t think one of them took the books, do you?” I’d just come to terms with the fact that not all vamps were bad. Then again, not all humans and demons were good, either. “Alejandro was on stage the whole time.”

“But one of his people could have easily done it,” Micah countered.

SO COULD ONE OF OUR PEOPLE, Fang reminded him.

Micah glared at him. “Whose side are you on?”

Fang sat back on his haunches and managed to look surprised. WHOA, DUDE. I’M JUST SAYING. YOU KNOW, POINTING OUT THE OBVIOUS.

“I know, I know,” Micah said apologetically. “But everyone in the Underground knows how important the books are to *all* of us. I can’t believe a vampire would take them.”

I turned to Tessa. “Can you use your powers to find a clue?”

She shrugged. "I don't know. My gift doesn't work like that. If I touched the thief, a prophecy about the encyclopedia might emerge, but I can't control it. My powers decide what's important for that person . . . which usually isn't what's important to us."

Okay, she couldn't go around touching people and spouting fortunes without someone getting suspicious. I took a deep breath. "What do we do now?"

"We find the books," Micah said, as if it were obvious.

"And how do we go about doing that?" I asked.

He shrugged. "First, let's make a list of everyone who was present. Tessa and I can probably remember all of the demons. Do you know any of the vamps besides Alejandro?"

"Some of them." Certainly not all. "What are you going to do with the list? Question everyone?"

Tessa frowned. "Good point. Do you really want to tell your people the books are missing again, and that vamps might have stolen them?"

Micah looked thoughtful. "Maybe not." He glanced down at Fang. "*You* can read the minds of both demons and vampires."

YEAH, BUT ONLY WHAT THEY HAPPEN TO BE THINKING ABOUT AT THE TIME. IT'S NOT LIKE I CAN RUMMAGE AROUND IN THEIR BRAINS, DUDE.

I nodded. "And I can read the minds of vamps when they try to control me, but Alejandro's men know that, so they won't try it."

Micah looked at Fang. "How many demons know about your ability?"

MOST OF THEM. IT'S HOW THEY RECOGNIZE ME AS ONE OF THEM.

"Too bad," Micah said. "I was hoping to have Val casually mention the books then see what you can find in their heads."

I nodded. After all, it was partially my fault the encyclopedias were missing again. "We can still do that. And hey, if they steer clear, *that* will tell us something, too. But what if none of the demons took the books?"

"Then the thief must be one of Alejandro's people," Micah said, obviously liking that idea much better. "He says he wishes to cooperate with us. Maybe he'll agree to let you question his vampire lieutenants."

"Good plan," I had to admit. If the vamps tried to control me, I *could* rummage around in *their* brains.

"But Tessa has a good point," Micah added. "Let's try to keep it secret for awhile. If you could get into contact with as many of the people present tonight as possible, maybe we can eliminate some of them as suspects."

“Got any suggestions for how to do that?” I asked. “It’s not like I know many of these demons, and I don’t have a good reason to visit the New Blood Movement since Ramirez pulled me off duty.” I was still temporarily on leave from the San Antonio police department’s Special Crimes Unit, after slicing off Lily’s head.

“I’ll take care of getting you in touch with the demons,” Micah said and eyed me speculatively. “Do you feel ready to go back to work?”

“Yes. I didn’t have any problems tonight controlling Lola.” Not many, anyway.

“Good. Then contact Lieutenant Ramirez and tell him so.”

“What if he doesn’t want to let me? Can I tell him we’re searching for the books?”

Micah thought for a moment. “Yes, but ask him not to mention it to his wife. I trust Maria, but the fewer demons who know, the better.”

“Okay. Fang, let’s go.”

ALL RIGHT, Fang exclaimed, whirling around in excitement. BACK IN THE GAME AGAIN.

Yeah. I was more than ready . . . sitting around for the past few days doing nothing had bored me out of my gourd. This would give me something to do.

NOT TO MENTION GIVE YOU THE CHANCE TO SEE DAN AGAIN, Fang said slyly.

You have no right to talk, I shot back at him. *After all, you have a girlfriend now.*

Fang strutted out the door. NOT YET, BUT I’M WORKING ON IT. PRINCESS IS ONE HOT LITTLE BITCH.

Try Me

Chapter Four



On the way to the station, I had to listen to Fang yammer on and on about Princess—her beautiful hair, her gorgeous eyes, her wonderful coloring. You’d think it would be difficult to hear him talk inside my brain from the back of a small motorcycle, but noooo. I couldn’t avoid the never-ending babble in my mind. It made me want to puke.

HEY, Fang protested. I HAVE TO LISTEN TO YOU MOON OVER DANNY BOY . . . AND I CAN’T TURN THAT OFF.

“I don’t moon over Dan. And it’s not my fault you hear all my thoughts.” I couldn’t shut him out, so the hellhound heard every single freakin’ thing in my head. Then again, it was a small price to pay for the fuzzy mutt’s devotion. We were best friends.

AWWW . . . YOU LIKE ME. YOU REALLY LIKE ME, Fang said as we pulled up to the station.

There was sarcasm in that remark, naturally, but also a bit of real feeling. He made me grin. I took off my helmet then pulled off the goggles that protected Fang’s eyes. Rubbing his ears, I said, “Don’t let it go to your head.”

We walked into the police station, and I spoke to the woman at the desk. “Is Lieutenant Ramirez in?”

“Yes, but he’s meeting with everyone in the Special Crimes Unit. You can wait in his office—”

“Well, I’m a Scuzzie, too, so I’ll join them.”

“No, wait—” the woman said, half-rising as if to stop me.

I kept on going. Ramirez was the only one who could tell me what to do. Not some chick who sat a desk all day and had never even seen a vampire or a part-demon.

It seemed like a strange time to have a meeting, in the middle of a night shift, but that probably meant it was really important. I needed to be there.

Fang and I headed toward the briefing room. The station was drab, shabby, and gray—very government issue. Not a lot of money went into keeping up the building, but the SCU did have some of the best toys around to keep their people safe—like vamp-proof vehicles coated in silver and special ambulances-slash “dead-undead” pickup units. At least they had their priorities straight.

I didn’t want Ramirez to tell me to mind my own business in front of his all-human subordinates, so I just cracked the door in the back open a bit so I could hear. Fang sighed in disgust and flopped down beside me.

Peering in, I saw Dan and Lt. Ramirez at the front, talking to each other in low voices as twenty people or so muttered in the background. *Looks like the meeting hasn’t started yet*, I told Fang.

Lt. Ramirez looked the same as always: whip-thin, care-worn, and über serious. As for Dan, he looked good—real good. Short brown hair, chiseled features, strong bod, the gleam of heroic manliness in his eyes. What’s not to like?

Fang snorted. AND YOU MADE FUN OF MY FEELINGS FOR PRINCESS . . .

I ignored him as I concentrated on Dan. Three days ago, he’d sounded so positive and upbeat, so glad that I’d killed his former-fiancée-turned-evil-vampire. He’d even seemed willing to accept Lola. Had he changed his mind since then?

MAYBE HE FEELS EMBARRASSED THAT A GIRL SAVED HIS LIFE.

I hadn’t thought about *that*. Was he really that narrow-minded? I’d saved Rick, Jen, and Fang that day, too. Dan hadn’t seemed like the macho type who’d resent a chick saving his bacon.

Ramirez turned to the crowd. “All right, quiet down. There have been a lot of rumors flying around about Val Shapiro, and we’re here to set them straight.”

About *me*? What the heck? No wonder the woman at the desk had tried to stop me. Fang perked up, practically quivering with the indignation I could feel radiating from him. I grabbed the scruff of his neck to keep him from barging into the room. I wanted to hear this.

“What would you like to know?” Ramirez asked.

Detective Mike Fenton stood up. “We heard rumors about what went down at that nest of vampires. She chopped one’s head off but let the rest of them bloodsuckers live.”

I winced. I thought Mike and his partner, Hank Horowitz, had accepted me after I’d clobbered Hank in a fair fight. Maybe Fang was right, and men didn’t like being beaten by a girl.

FANG IS *ALWAYS* RIGHT, came the hellhound’s comment, right on cue. He shook off my restraining hand, promising he’d chill.

The muttering around the room showed that other detectives wondered about my loyalty, too.

Ramirez held up his hands. “The truth is this. The vamp Val killed was causing the rash of vampire attacks throughout the city and attempting to take over the Movement for her own purposes. Val stopped her. The other leaders of the Movement have no quarrel with us, and we have none with them. That’s why she let them live.”

“The only good vamp is a dead vamp,” someone said.

How original.

Annoyed, Ramirez said, “The New Blood Movement has proven they will not take anyone’s blood without consent. As I’ve told you before, the SCU is not authorized to kill vampires just because they are vampires. Not unless they attack an innocent.”

More muttering, then someone else asked, “How do we know Shapiro isn’t a bloodsucker herself?”

What? How the heck did they come up with that lame idea?

Ramirez looked annoyed. “Val is not a vampire—”

“Oh, yeah?” Horowitz stood up, interrupting the lieutenant. “She’s wicked fast and her reflexes and healing are way better than any human’s. That’s not natural.”

Beefy blond redneck.

“Just like a vamp,” Fenton added.

Oh, crap. From their perspective, it did make sense to suspect me.

Dan frowned. “She’s my partner. I’d know if she was a vampire. She’s not—I’ve seen her outside in full daylight.”

“Maybe she tricked you,” Fenton insisted. “Because she’s sure not human.”

Narrow-minded little toad. The fact that he was right made it even worse. As anger rose within me, so did the lust demon. Lola was ticked. She urged me to let them have it, let them know just how violent and inhuman I really was.

Fang glanced at me. HOLD IT TOGETHER, VAL. THEY’RE NOT WORTH IT. THE MAJORITY OF YOU IS FULLY HUMAN. MORE THAN THEY ARE, THAT’S FOR SURE.

Fang made a lot of sense. But as the questions flew, so did the stupid theories. Dan and Ramirez were kind enough to keep my secret—no “hey, guys, our teenaged crime fighter is part demon!”—but everyone else’s idiotic questions were royally ticking me off. My blood was bubbling, seeking an outlet, seeking a way to vent Lola’s wrath.

When someone yelled, “What the hell *is* she?” I couldn’t take it anymore.

I pushed open the door, Fang right behind me. “I’ll tell you what she *is*. She’s *pissed*.”

Fang barked for emphasis, making it clear he felt the same way.

They all turned to gape at me. Dan looked stunned. Even Ramirez looked a bit surprised. The rest stared, wondering, measuring, doubting . . . like I was some freak in a sideshow. But now that I had everyone's attention, I had no idea what to do with it.

GIVE 'EM WHAT FOR, Fang suggested.

Good idea. The demon energy within me popped and sizzled, looking for an outlet. I really wanted to punch one of them—or two or five—but restrained myself. Not a good idea. Instead, I put all that energy into motion and marched up to the front and glared at all of them.

Some avoided my eyes, but others glared right back, looking suspicious and distrusting.

Damn it, just when I thought I finally belonged somewhere. A few days ago, these men had welcomed me into their midst, helped me celebrate my eighteenth birthday, and accepted me as one of them. Now, the suspicion and uncertainty practically rolled off them in waves. I turned to Dan, hoping for a spark of compassion, but his expression was closed, unreadable. A void opened up somewhere inside me.

“Okay, Miss Pissy,” Fenton snarled from the front row. “Tell us all about it.”

Seeing he was wearing a silver cross on a chain, I leaned toward him, smiling. As he scowled back, I snaked out my hand and placed my hand against his necklace. He lunged for me, but a couple of other guys held him back. Too bad.

I held up my palm. “See? No burn. Not a vamp.”

I thrust my unscathed hand at Fenton and he sneered, murder in his eyes.

“Then what are you?” someone asked. “Your eyes flashed a funny kind of purple just now. That's not normal.”

I looked at Dan, but he shook his head, expressionless, refusing to give me any advice. My heart sank. Had he deserted me? I glanced at Ramirez and raised my eyebrow, silently asking if I should reveal my secret. His own wife was like me, part-demon.

He nodded slightly, looking annoyed but determined. “Go ahead,” he said. When I nodded, he turned to the rest of the room. “What Val is about to tell you is confidential and, like the existence of vampires, is not to be discussed outside this department. If I learn that any one of you has talked about this with anyone else, I'll feed you to the vampires myself. Is that clear?”

The lieutenant's unyielding glare made it clear he was willing to go all Terminator on their butts if they didn't comply. They grimaced but nodded.

I took a deep breath, wondering how the heck to say this.

GET IT OVER WITH QUICK, Fang advised. LIKE PULLING OFF A BANDAGE.

Okay, here went nothing. “I'm one-eighth succubus,” I blurted out and winced, expecting the worst.

The general consensus was a bewildered, “Huh?”

Thankfully, Ramirez came to my rescue. “A succubus is a type of female demon who is able to . . . attract men at will.”

Well, that was a polite way of putting it.

“Wait, I read about them,” Horowitz said.

Horowitz could read? Who knew?

“They’re lust demons. They control men with their thoughts and suck them dry. They don’t just steal a man’s sex urge. They steal his brain.”

Since everyone in the room except me and one female detective was of the male persuasion, they didn’t look too happy about this. I wasn’t thrilled with his negative interpretation either, and Lola sure wasn’t. Forget trying to explain that lust was a two-way street, and brains weren’t part of the equation. Lola surged to the forefront, and I struggled with her, battled with the thought of letting her loose and giving them a baleful demonstration of her power.

Thankfully, Ramirez took charge. “That’s a little inaccurate. A succubus will *enthrall* a man and feed on the sexual energy he generates, but she won’t necessarily harm him. In Val’s case, it isn’t a problem.”

Fenton rose threateningly to his feet. “How do we know she’s not controlling us *now*?” Others rose as well, agreeing with him.

“I’m not,” I gritted out. Idiots.

“Oh yeah? Prove it.”

Furious, I said, “You want proof? I’ll show you the difference.”

VAL, DON’T, Fang cried out.

Too late. The demon I’d tried so hard to control burst free and lashed out, instantly ensnaring every man in the room except Dan and Ramirez, and even they looked hypnotized.

Dan’s sexual independence was a matter of snarky pride to me, and Ramirez was like a father figure. But the others? Let them see.

Invisible lines of force snapped into being, connecting me to the seven chakra energy centers in their bodies, strongest in the second chakra of sexuality. They wanted me, worshipped me, would do anything I wanted. But I wanted only one thing, and it wasn’t about sex. “Sit down and shut up,” I snapped.

They complied immediately. “*That’s* what it feels like to have a succubus control you.”

OKAY, YOU GOT ‘EM, Fang said drily. SO WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH ‘EM?

Lola urged me to take advantage, whispering how mean they were, how they deserved to be shown what I could do, how wonderful it would be to soak up all that lovely energy . . .

No, I couldn't. It would be wrong. As the two sides of my nature slugged it out, the one woman detective in the room, a petite blond I'd never seen before, came up out of her seat and charged toward me. "You've made your point. Now stop," she ordered.

I tried, I really did, but my panic only fed Lola more.

Fang poked my leg with his nose. C'MON, VAL, GET IT TOGETHER.

As I struggled with Lola, the cop hauled her fist back and punched me in the face.

My head snapped back. Damn, that hurt. But it didn't help. In fact, it made it more difficult to control my raging demon. Fang growled at her, but the female cop ignored him and tried to hit me again. I caught her fist in my hand. "Don't," I managed to get out. "I'm . . . trying . . . to stop. You're . . . not helping."

Thankfully, she must have believed me or saw the war on my face, because her body relaxed, though her eyes continually darted between my face and the men. She didn't seem worried about Fang. A lot of vamps had made that mistake.

BUT SHE'S NO VAMP, Fang said. AND SHE'S RIGHT.

I know that. And the sound of Fang's calm voice in my head helped me get a grip. Slowly, carefully, I released my hooks in the men's chakras. For a moment, they sat there, stunned. Then all hell broke loose as they yelled out questions and curses.

Surprisingly, assistance came from an unlikely source. The female cop took a deep breath and bellowed, "Sit down and shut up." I don't think she realized she echoed what I had told them moments before . . . and I hadn't realized such a loud voice could come out of such a small body. Was she part-demon, too?

NO, Fang said. I CAN'T HEAR HER THOUGHTS. BUT SHE'S A FIRECRACKER, ISN'T SHE?

Yeah, I had to admit.

Dan looked at me grimly. Ramirez finally seemed to come out of his trance. "Stop it. *Now.*"

Most of the men quieted down, except for Horowitz. "No way—"

"You goaded her into it," the woman said. "Stop complaining. You wanted proof. She did what you asked."

Whoa. I hadn't expected *support*.

Some of them looked a little shame-faced, but mostly they looked confused and ticked off.

"Thanks," I told her.

The blonde turned her glare on me. "I didn't do it for *you*."

Huh? This chick's abrupt attitude changes could give me mental whiplash.

Dan stepped forward. “Thank you, Detective Jones. Now, if you would all do as she suggested?” His words might be polite, but the steel behind them held a warning I wouldn’t want to test.

The room quieted, and I felt like a target with a whole bunch of mental darts aimed at it.

Of course, someone had to say something. And equally of course, it was Horowitz. “Demon,” he muttered. “No better than a damned vampire.”

It hit me like a punch in the gut, especially when the others murmured in agreement and Dan didn’t say anything else in my defense.

“That’s enough, Horowitz,” Lt. Ramirez said, his tone annoyed and biting.

Everyone’s resentful expression settled on Ramirez. “There is a *huge* difference,” the lieutenant said. “Demons are born—vampires are *made*. One encourages our natural passions, for good or bad—the other simply wants to use us for dinner.

“The vampire Val killed chose to be made into one of the undead, chose to try to rule San Antonio with fear and death. Val is only one-

eighth demon. She was born with no choice in the matter, just as I had no choice in being born Hispanic, and you, Horowitz, had no choice in being born part village idiot.” He ignored the snickers and continued. “The difference between her and the vampire is that *she* chose to use her nature to fight on our side, fight for the good and the right, the innocents. There is a *huge* difference,” he repeated, glaring at the men in emphasis.

They wouldn’t meet his gaze, and I knew they didn’t believe him. Maybe the lieutenant’s little speech should have made me feel better, but I knew something the rest of them didn’t. The reason Ramirez was pro-demon was because his wife was part-demon as well.

The emptiness was back. I should feel more pain, but instead, I felt numb. Unfortunately, I was getting used to being thought of as a monster.

Ramirez waved Sergeant Jones, Dan, and me to a seat then stood with his feet apart and his hands clasped behind his back. Dan refused to look at me, and stared icily into thin air. Ramirez glanced around for a moment, as if weighing the tension in the room. To me, it felt as thick as mud.

“I’m glad this came out,” he said. “We’re lucky to have Val in the department. She’s been staking the bad vamps for years—by herself, without help, protecting her human family—and she’s the most effective weapon we have in our fight against murderous vamps in San Antonio. In fact, I’d like to hire more demons like her.”

Explosions of disbelief sounded around the room. I managed to keep my mouth shut, subduing Lola, as Ramirez waved the men to silence. He pivoted and looked down at Dan. “Sullivan, you’ve worked with one fully human partner and one partner who is part-demon. Which do you prefer?”

Dan looked annoyed at being put on the spot, but said, “My first partner was a good man. He wasn’t prepared for the full power of a vampire’s evil, and so he was killed. Val, on the other hand, knows how vampires think, and she understands exactly how deadly they are; she *does* the killing, which keeps both of us alive.”

Didn’t exactly answer the question. *Gee, Dan, thanks for nothing.* His attitude was starting to tick me off.

“I believe there are more part-demons in San Antonio like her,” Ramirez said.

The other detectives gaped at him.

Fang snorted. YEAH, RIGHT. AS IF HE DOESN’T KNOW.

Chill, Fang. You want him to expose the entire Demon Underground? His wife? They keep their identity a secret for a reason. There’s a lot of ignorance and prejudice out there.

Oblivious to our mental conversation, Ramirez continued. “I’d like to seek them out, find more of them. I think they’re our allies. We need every advantage we can get in this fight against murderous vampires.”

He went on to explain his position, talking up the advantages and refusing to believe there was a negative side. His arguments were all thorough and convincing. He must have thought this through before today.

Finally, at the end, some of the guys looked ready to be persuaded . . . but not everyone. I was impressed. I hadn’t figured on anyone agreeing with him, except maybe Dan. And speaking of Dan, he’d put in a few good words for me, but it felt more like he didn’t really want to side with me against his buddies.

“In fact,” Ramirez concluded, “you may be living next door to a part-demon and not even know it.”

They didn’t seem convinced, so he added, “There’s another part-demon in this room, someone you probably don’t suspect. Would he like to reveal himself?”

Who? I glanced at Fang. *Who else is a demon?*

HE’S TALKING ABOUT ME.

Sure enough, as everyone else glanced around the room, wondering who it could be, I saw Ramirez looking steadily at me.

He must be crazy. Look at how they reacted to *me*. I’d hate to see what they’d do if told that even man’s best friend might be part-demon, too.

NOW, IT’S OKAY. I THINK I KNOW WHAT HE WANTS. AFTER ALL, I’M JUST A CUTE WITTLE DOGGIE-WOGGIE. Fang trotted forward and jumped up on the table at the front of the room, then barked to get everyone’s attention and glanced at the lieutenant expectantly.

“Most of you know Fang,” Ramirez said. “And you know he’s Val’s constant companion.” Grudging nods of agreement. “But what you don’t know is that Fang is part-demon, too. The preferred term is . . . ‘part-hellhound.’”

At that, Fang sat down, wagged his tail, and let his tongue loll sideways out of his mouth, looking goofy. Everyone laughed at the joke.

Ramirez smiled. “Being part demon, he not only has the ability to take down vampires and the occasional human . . .” Ramirez glanced sideways at Fenton, who’d felt Fang’s sharp teeth on his behind . . . “but he has the capability of understanding human speech. Fang, are you willing to demonstrate?”

Fang nodded, which made a lot of the chuckles stop.

“Fang, would you please—”

“Wait,” Fenton said. “How do we know this isn’t a set-up?” He jabbed a finger at me. “That she’s just trained him really well?”

Of course he’d think that. Moron.

Ramirez smiled and gestured toward Fenton. “Then be my guest. *You* talk to him.”

Fenton leaned forward and said, “Sit.”

Since Fang was already sitting, he rolled his eyes. Everyone laughed again.

The back of Fenton’s neck turned red. “Lay down.” Fang did. “Roll over. Play dead.”

With each command, Fang did exactly as he asked. I hated watching him act like a performing monkey and wondered how long he’d put up with it.

AS LONG AS IT TAKES TO CONVINCING THESE IDIOTS THAT I CAN UNDERSTAND THEM.

“Lift your right paw,” Fenton commanded.

Fang stood, turned to the side and lifted his back right leg. I gaped. No, he wouldn’t.

Everyone cracked up and Fenton said hastily, “No, no. The *front* paw.”

Fang turned back to face him and raised his front paw, then flopped it up and down in a wave, looking cute and adorable.

A man toward the back asked, “Did you really bite Mike Fenton?”

Fang nodded as Ramirez said, “He deserved it at the time.” True—he’d jumped me in a fair fight and made it *un*-fair. Fang had only evened the odds.

“And what does Mike deserve now?” the man asked with a grin.

Fang whipped around and leaned forward, pointing his butt in Fenton’s direction. He turned to look over his shoulder with a doggie grin then released an explosive sound and stench.

Everyone cracked up, even Fenton.

I shook my head. Male humor. Strange how releasing a little gas could bond them together. And make a part-demon look harmless and amusing. *Good job, Fang.*

YOU GOT IT, CUPCAKE. He turned around and bowed, first to the right, then to the left. If they didn't realize Fang could understand human speech by now, they had no business being in this unit.

Ramirez took advantage of the friendly mood to say, "Are you convinced *now*?"

Fenton held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. No way could you fake that."

Lt. Ramirez thanked Fang then said to the detectives, "Open your minds. You're in this unit because you're able to accept the idea of evil in forms most people can't imagine. Now I'm asking you to accept Val, Fang, and the other part-demons like them, as allies. To believe they're only dangerous to our common enemy, which is not all vampires, just the law-breaking ones. We don't arrest citizens based on anything other than their actions, do we? That rule has to include *all* citizens of San Antonio, human, vampire, and part-demon. Think about it."

Then, wisely, he let them leave on a high note, since the laughter in the room had dissipated the tension. He asked me to follow him, and for Dan and Detective Jones to wait around. I gave Dan an angry, wistful look, but couldn't tell if he caught it.

Fang and I joined the lieutenant in his office, and before he could say anything, I blurted out, "Just now, enthralling them . . . was an accident. I didn't mean to do it. I couldn't control it."

Looking weary, Ramirez said, "I know. That's why I asked you to take a break from the unit until you got your power under control. I was afraid something like this would happen. The cat is out of the bag, now. Or, rather, the succubus."

Humor from Ramirez? Maybe I wasn't in such deep doo-doo as I feared. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"I know you didn't," he said, interrupting. "I was going to let them know about your powers eventually, just not in this way. But I'm afraid now I'll have to insist you take time off until the effect of this episode has been forgotten a little. I can't have my entire unit being worried that you'll hypnotize them and make them bark like a dog."

NOTHING WRONG WITH BARKING, Fang protested.

"I can't," I said, feeling miserable. "Have you heard of the *Encyclopedia Magicka*?"

He nodded. "My wife mentioned it. Said it's been lost for over a decade."

"Well, not exactly. I had it." When he looked surprised, I added, "But I didn't know it was the only copy in existence and that my father had stolen it. I gave it back, honest."

"I'm glad to hear it, but I don't see how that pertains to the situation at hand."

"Because I gave it to Micah at the underground social and it was stolen again." I told Lt. Ramirez the whole story then concluded by explaining why I wanted to go back to work with the sanction of the SCU so Alejandro wouldn't get suspicious when I questioned his people. I needed to find the books before someone could use them to do harm.

Ramirez sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “You make a good case. I’ll have to change my plans.”

He rose to stick his head out the door, and called in the other two. The blonde followed Dan in and Ramirez said, “I don’t think you’ve met Detective Jones, have you, Val?”

“Not officially,” I said. Though her fist had met my face.

Fang chortled.

I ignored him as Ramirez introduced us. “Nicole Jones, Val Shapiro.”

We nodded warily at each other, and Ramirez gestured for the two of them to sit. They did, Dan taking the farthest chair, making Nicole sit next to me. What was up with *that*?

YEAH, Fang said. YOU BATHED THIS MORNING.

Ramirez leaned forward, clasping his hands together. “Detective Jones is new to the unit, and I’d like you two to train her before I assign her a new partner.”

I glanced at her. Short, slight, blond . . . and fully human. What made the lieutenant think she could possibly take on a vamp and win?

Some of my doubt must have shown in my eyes, because Dan said curtly, “Nic can do it.”

Nic? How was it Dan knew the pretty blonde well enough to call her by a nickname? “I already have two partners, and I don’t need another one,” I said bluntly.

YOU JUST DON’T WANT THE COMPETITION, Fang said with a smirk.

Dang, I hated how he could see right through me . . . and call me on it. I glanced at her doubtfully. “Besides, this job might be a bit too much for her.”

“Nic can do it,” Dan repeated. “And she has good reason—her brother was killed by one of Lily’s followers.”

“I’m sorry, I know how tough this has to be on you,” I said to Nicole. “But all the wanting in the world doesn’t mean you can kill vampires.” I should know—all the wanting in the world hadn’t made me fully human.

“I’m better than I look,” she said quietly. “Like you and your dog.”

SHE’S GOT YOU THERE, Fang said.

Whose side are you on?

I’M JUST SAYING.

Well, stop. You’re not helping.

“Jones is part of the unit,” Ramirez said. “That’s not up for negotiation.”

I shook my head. “But you said you wanted to bring on more part-demons. Doesn’t it make more sense to have me train them instead of her? Any other scuzzie can train her.”

“But you’re the only other female,” Ramirez said softly. “You can help her, show her a few tricks.”

“And you trained me,” Dan added. “You’re good at it, Val.”

He looked so darned serious . . . no sign of a smile or anything to show that we’d kissed and meant something to each other not that long ago. Was this change Nicole’s fault? Probably. No doubt the cute little blonde had wormed her way into Dan’s life during the past few days. Imagine what would happen if she had more time to work on him?

“I’ll be better at training demons,” I insisted. “Who else could do it?” I gave Ramirez a steady glare, reminding him silently that I needed to interact with demons and vamps to find the books. Not some lightweight who’d probably faint at the first sight of fangs.

He nodded. “You’re right. That is a better use for your talents. Okay, Sullivan, you take on Jones as your new partner, and Val and I will recruit some more part-demons for the SCU.”

Wait. No, that’s so not what I meant. I gaped at them all, wondering how to retract everything I’d just said without looking like a jealous fool.

YOU CAN’T, Fang confirmed. WERE YOU TRYING TO DRIVE DAN INTO HER ARMS? ’CAUSE THAT’S WHAT JUST HAPPENED.

Yeah. Talk about a royal screw-up . . .

Try Me

Chapter Five



Dan stood and nodded. “Okay. Let’s get to work, Nic.”

They headed out the door and down the hall before I got my act together.

No, he couldn’t leave like this. Heart in my throat, I blurted out, “Dan, wait.”

He and Nicole turned to stare at me. *Now what, genius?* “Uh, can I talk to you, Dan? In private?”

“Is it really necessary, Val?”

Why did he look so annoyed, like I was some dumb kid hanging on his shirttail, or something? “Yes, it is.” I had to find out what the heck was the matter with him. Fang trotted forward and poked him in the shin for emphasis.

He heaved a sigh. “Okay. Nic, you want to wait for me in the break room?”

She nodded and gave me an odd look I couldn’t interpret, then left. I wanted to grab his arm, turn him away from her, but was afraid he’d pull away. Not wanting to test it, I said, “Let’s go back to the briefing room, okay?”

Dan followed me to the room, which was empty as I suspected. Good. I glanced down at Fang who backed up, saying, HOW ABOUT I JUST WAIT OUTSIDE?

“Thanks.” He could probably still hear my thoughts from there, but it was nice of him to give me the illusion of a little privacy.

The door shut behind Fang and I turned to face Dan. He stood there, arms crossed, annoyance on his face. “What was that all about?” he asked. “You’re the best trainer we have. Do you want her to get killed?”

“No, of course not.” I wouldn’t wish that kind of death on anyone. “But I have a good reason for wanting to train demons instead.” Such as finding a certain thief . . .

“Like what?”

I hunched my shoulders and glanced away from his hard stare. “I . . . can’t tell you.”

“More secrets, Val? Why can’t you tell me?”

“This involves Micah—something I have to do for him. It’s his secret, and I don’t have permission to share it with you.” I’d already shared too many of Micah’s secrets with Dan. “But Ramirez knows about it.”

Dan nodded. He understood honor and duty. “I thought—” He broke off and rubbed his neck with one hand.

“Thought what?”

“That you might be jealous of Nic,” he said reluctantly.

Lola rose within me, jealous, possessive . . . her emotions focused into a single word: *Mine*. It reverberated throughout my body, demanding Dan’s absolute obedience. Lola was like a genie in a bottle, desperately rocking to get out and sink her hooks into Dan.

Oh, crap. I *had* to keep her from popping the cork. Enslaving Dan each time I saw him was *not* the way to win him over. I closed my eyes and fought Lola to a standstill. Luckily, it seemed to be easier this time.

Once I had her under control, I opened my eyes to see Dan watching me warily. “Should I be?” I asked as calmly as I could.

Dan wouldn’t meet my eyes. “You and I were partners, Val. Nothing more.”

My throat choked up and I barely got out, “That’s a lie and you know it. What’s the matter with you, Dan?” I asked it softly, hoping he’d see reason, not think this way, not treat me like this.

“Nothing.”

Yeah, right. “Don’t give me that crap. You act like I have Ebola or something.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “I’m just keeping my distance.”

“Why?” I hated that it came out more as a wail.

“Come on, Val. You know how it is. People bond during intense situations, but it’s not based on anything real. It never lasts.”

“You don’t know that.” When he did nothing but shrug, I added, “You said you were cool with what I am, that every man needs a little Lola in his life.”

He sighed. “Yeah, but I still remember what it felt like to be totally owned by you. I still feel the pull, and I hate the fact that I can’t trust my own emotions around you.”

“Dan, I promise, I won’t do it again—”

“You just did. Tonight, in this very room.”

“I couldn’t help it. They goaded me into it.”

“And what happens when they goad you again? Or I do something that happens to tick you off? You’re like a time bomb waiting to explode and I don’t want to be in the blast zone again when it happens.”

“I’m getting better, I swear it. Just let me—”

“No.” He cut me off with a weary sigh. “It won’t work. It would never have worked. I’m too old for you, you have your whole life ahead of you—”

“Cut the crap, Dan.” He was pissing me off now. “Stop acting like you’re doing this for me. Seven years difference isn’t that much and you know it.” It certainly hadn’t stopped him before. “Tell the truth. This is really about that little blonde, isn’t it?”

“Nic?”

“Of course, Nic. Who else is slobbering all over you?” I knew I sounded like a jealous idiot, but I couldn’t help myself. I had to know what he thought.

“She’s not—”

“Okay, slight exaggeration. But the timing seems awfully convenient. You meet her and all of a sudden you’re dumping me. What does that tell you?”

“Nothing. It’s a coincidence, nothing more.”

“That’s not how it looks from this angle. Are you going to date her?” The thought made my gut tighten.

His jaw tightened. “I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it. But if I do, it’s none of your business.”

I pressed my lips together and nodded. None of my business. Guess that told me where I stood. “Got it.” I was out, she was in. My eyes suddenly stung and I looked down so he wouldn’t get the satisfaction of seeing me hurt.

“I need time, Val,” he said softly. “I need to think about this. It’s better if we don’t see each other for awhile. Maybe this is a good thing.”

Not trusting myself to speak, I nodded again then turned my back on him, hunching forward against the pain.

I heard him walk away and the door close behind him.

Soon after came the click of nails against the linoleum floor. Fang nudged me. YOU OKAY?

Hot tears spilled down my cheeks and I dropped to the floor and hugged him to me, burying my face in his wiry fur. “No,” I choked out.

He licked my hand. HE DOESN’T DESERVE YOU.

Try Me

Yeah, and he didn't deserve my tears either, the rotten insecure-with-my-power jerk. I raised my head and wiped away my tears. "I know." A world of possibilities waited for me out there, and I hadn't even started to discover them. Time to make like Magellan and explore.

I rubbed Fang's ears, silently thanking him for being there for me. "He was right about one thing, though."

WHAT?

"I do need to find a way to control Lola. I can't let her get the best of me again."

Fang snuggled closer. MICAH CAN HELP.

I hoped so. 'Cause if I didn't, I'd never be able to find a guy who loved me for myself . . . Lola and all.

Try Me

Chapter Six



I decided to take the rest of the night off and actually sleep in the dark, like most people do. Unfortunately, that meant I woke up late morning just as Dan's sister came home from work. Gwen Sullivan, normally a bouncing bubble of fun, greeted me from the kitchen as Fang went out the doggie door of the townhouse. Now, though, the redhead looked a little tired after her nursing shift in the ER.

She opened the refrigerator and put some eggs and cheese on the counter. "Want an omelet?" she asked.

Gwen was a great cook—something I was so not—but she was also Dan's sister, and I wasn't sure I wanted to talk to her right now. "No, thanks." I grabbed a Coke, figuring I'd catch something to eat later.

"How are you doing, Val?" she persisted.

"Fine," I muttered without meeting her eyes.

"Really? That's not what I hear."

Surprised, I glanced up to see her watching me with a combination of sympathy and pity in her eyes. I'd love to unload on her—the only girlfriend I had—but sheesh, Dan was her brother and she didn't know about my inner demon. "You heard wrong," I said shortly, and headed toward my bedroom.

That didn't stop her. She followed me. "Dan told me what happened the other day." She paused in the doorway to my room, then added softly, "All of it. The succubus and everything."

Oh crap. I closed my eyes briefly then turned around to see her expression. What did she think of me?

"Hey, I'm cool," Gwen said softly, looking like she wished she could take my hurt away. "You can't help what you are. I told Dan that, too."

"It didn't do any good," I muttered.

Fang came trotting in then and looked back and forth between the two of us. HEY, WHAT'S GOING ON?

She knows.

ABOUT ME, TOO?

Gwen answered that herself by saying, “He told me about Fang, too. Makes sense. I wondered why he only ate people food, was so well-mannered, and seemed to always understand what we said. He’s a lot smarter than any dog I’ve ever known.”

She bent down to pet him and Fang accepted it as his due. DID I MENTION HOW MUCH I LIKE HER?

“I don’t know about the well-mannered part,” I said drily. “He’s a bit of a smart-ass.”

HEY, Fang objected. I AM NOT. I’M A WHOLE LOT OF SMART ASS.

I laughed and repeated it to Gwen. She chuckled, then said, “You’re really good at that—changing the subject.”

I tried to shrug it away, but Gwen wouldn’t let me. “If you ever want to talk about it . . .”

My stomach churned at the thought. My emotions were still too raw, like an open wound. “Thanks, but I have help. My cousin Micah—” I stopped there, not knowing if Dan had told her about Micah and the Demon Underground. Again, it wasn’t my secret to share.

“Okay, but can I make a suggestion?”

“Sure.” Hey, if it would help remove some of this pain, I was willing to try anything.

“Think about who you are and who you want to be.”

“Huh?”

She sank down onto my bed and asked, “Who is Val Shapiro? Are you just a bad-ass vampire hunter and a succubus? Is that all that defines you?”

I frowned and sat down beside her. “I don’t get you.”

She bumped my shoulder with hers. “What I’m asking is, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Fang cocked his head, also waiting for my answer. “I, uh . . . I don’t know. I never thought about it.”

“Do you want to still be staking vamps when you’re forty?”

“Probably not.” I guess I figured I’d never live that long. “But what else can I do?”

“What do you want to do?” Gwen countered. “Do you have any other hobbies or interests?”

“Not really.”

Gwen nodded and stood to look around my room, studying it like she was trying to find something. “So, you’ve lived here . . . what? Almost a month?”

“I guess. So?”

“So there’s absolutely nothing personal here, nothing that screams ‘Val.’ It’s all . . . generic.”

I glanced around, noticing it did look kind of bare. Guess I didn’t have the decorating gene. “Fang sometimes screams in my mind . . .”

Fang and Gwen snorted in unison. “Didn’t you ask your parents for more of your things when you left?”

“What things? I have my furniture, my vampire doll, and some jewelry from Mom . . .” I stopped, realizing that sounded kind of lame. “I guess I’m just not the materialistic type.”

Then again, the place did look kind of sterile, temporary. Especially compared to the decorating Gwen had done in the rest of the townhouse. She had lots of bright colors and funky doodads that really reflected her personality. What did this room say about mine?

She added gently, “I was hoping to learn more about you through the things you like to have around you.” She glanced down at Fang. “The only thing I can tell from this room is that you like smart-ass terriers.”

DAMN BETCHA, the terrier in question said.

Yeah, but how was I supposed to figure out what my style was?

WHY DON’T YOU ASK GWEN FOR HELP? SHE HAS A GREAT SENSE OF STYLE.

Out of the mouths of hellhounds . . . Out loud, I said, “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to add a bit of color or something.” Maybe then I’d actually want to stay here more often. “But will you help?”

Gwen grinned. “Of course. You know how much I love shopping.”

I laughed. “Retail therapy?”

“Something like that. What decorating style do you like?”

What styles were there? “I like what you’ve done. It’s fun.”

She shook her head. “No, the point of this is not to copy my style, but to find one of your own. Define yourself your way. Define Val.”

“Okay.” I nodded decisively, liking the idea of having something to focus on besides how miserable I felt. And it even sounded fun.

OH, JOY, Fang muttered. SHOPPING. I’LL PASS.

Just as well. I had special identification for him that said he was a working police dog, but it was still a hassle to take him in and out of stores.

“Good,” Gwen said with a little bounce. “Let’s go on my next day off—”

A loud beep went off then, startling both of us. I hadn't had a cell long enough to get used to it. I glanced at the phone. It was a text message from Micah, asking if I could meet him in an hour. "I need to answer this."

"Okay," Gwen said and exited the room. "I'll still make breakfast if you want some. For Fang, too."

YES! the walking garbage disposal said.

I grinned. "Thanks, we'll take you up on that after all."

Over breakfast, we made plans to go shopping on her next day off, then Fang and I headed to Micah's office at Club Purgatory. I paused at his office door, feeling my stomach churn again. Micah had promised to help me control Lola, and I really wanted to, but I wasn't sure what he had in mind or if I'd like how he planned to do it.

Fang shoved me with his nose. C'MON, TAKE IT LIKE A MAN. At my wry look, he corrected himself. ER, I MEAN, LIKE A VAMPIRE SLAYER.

Sighing, I raised my hand to knock but Tessa opened the door before my knuckles met the wood. "Hi. We're just finishing up our list of the demons who were at the party. Go on in—I'll see you later."

She left and I saw Shade and Micah conferring at the computer at Micah's desk. "We're printing it out now," Micah said. When I glanced questioningly at Shade, Micah added, "I trust Shade completely."

Fang sniffed the air, looking disappointed. GUESS HE LEFT PRINCESS AT HOME.

As the three of them finished their discussion, I glanced around the room. Elegant, classy, and kind of minimal but comfy. Lots of wood and warm colors. I liked this style, too, and it was way different from Gwen's. I frowned. Figuring out what I really liked might be harder than it looked.

"I think that's it," Micah said, and printed out two copies of the list. He gave one to me, saying, "Here's who we remember being at the club that afternoon."

I glanced at the list. "Where should I start? Do you have anyone you suspect of stealing the books?"

Micah shook his head. "No, if there was, I wouldn't have let them in the Underground. So, you can start anywhere. Shade will help. Ramirez suggested you two team up as partners—you can train each other."

I got how I'd help Shade, but . . . "How will he help me?"

"He can help you with control."

"With Lola?" How could he do that? He was just as susceptible as any other man . . . except Micah, of course.

"Yes," Micah said. "I promised I'd help you learn to manage . . . Lola, but first we have to make sure your inner demon isn't hungry. It's best to start sated, not empty. When was the last time you fed?"

Fed? I hated that word, hated the way it made me sound like a bloodsucking vampire. "Uh, last night. I lost it a bit."

“If you do as I’ve suggested and feed gradually, you won’t have that problem. You’ll be in total control.”

“I know,” I muttered, feeling a little embarrassed in front of Shade. And Lola had perked up in the shadow demon’s presence, which meant it was still too dangerous to be around him.

SHE’S NOT TOTALLY SATISFIED, Fang drawled, making it clear he was speaking to everyone in the room.

Tattletale.

But he ignored me as Micah said, “Okay, we’ll help you satisfy your inner demon under safe conditions. You can feed on Shade.”

Whoa. No way. I liked him.

THAT’S THE POINT, BABE.

I glared at Fang, but was glad he hadn’t shared those thoughts with everyone. “I can’t.”

“It’s okay,” Micah said gently. “He volunteered.”

“Really,” Shade said softly, “I don’t mind.” He took my hand, grounding himself in this reality, in me, so that he no longer flickered through a dozen different dimensions. Because of that, I could see the shadow demon’s features, though they were still partially hidden by his ever-present hood. Just as I remembered, he had shaggy blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and the face of an angel.

Lola wanted him. So did I, for that matter, but that was dangerous. For him, not me.

“Would it be easier if you could see me, or not?” Shade asked.

I gazed into his face, but the guy wasn’t accustomed to having people see his expressions, so he wasn’t used to having to hide his feelings. As a result, his face was too expressive, almost painfully so. Emotions paraded so clearly across his face that it was as if he’d written them there. Admiration, longing, hope . . . and that was before Lola reached out for him.

His seeming innocence took my breath away. I released his hand. “Not, I think.” It would feel too much like taking advantage.

He nodded, and Fang growled in my mind, BE NICE. HE’S MY FRIEND.

I am being nice. Would you rather Lola stripped him bare?

Fang harrumphed but didn’t say anything more.

“Okay,” Micah said. “Why don’t the two of you sit down and relax? And Fang, if you could refrain from distracting them?”

YOU GOT IT, PAL. Fang settled down next to me and laid his head on his paws.

We parked in Micah's comfortable chairs and I glanced at Shade, seeing nothing but the swirling dark ribbons of light where his skin should have been. Weirdly, it made me feel better that I couldn't see his face. But at least I knew he didn't mind this, that he actually looked forward to it.

"Relax," Micah reminded me. "Let loose of that hold on yourself, just a little, and reach out for Shade."

Lola was straining to get at the juicy tidbit that was Shade, so I tried to do as Micah said. But it didn't quite work that way. Instead of coming out as a trickle, the dam burst and Lola surged out and lunged for Shade, sending greedy tentacles of pure lust whipping into him.

He gasped.

No—that wasn't what I wanted to do!

I tried to pull back, but Micah said, "No, let it go. Go with it, don't fight it."

I forced myself to do as he said, and amazingly, he was right. Now that I wasn't trying to rein Lola in, she was content to slow down, explore Shade and all his reactions.

My God, this was so different from before. I didn't feel like a puppet master or that he was my slave. Instead, I felt Shade react to Lola, felt the heat rise in his blood, the longing for me. He clenched the arms of his chair tight and his breathing intensified. The energy Lola craved rose within him and flowed steadily into the demon inside me, filling her, satisfying her totally.

Wow—I was enjoying this as much as he was. Was this normal? It kind of felt like watching an X-rated movie. I wasn't sure whether to be embarrassed or excited. I was definitely squirmy.

"You're doing fine, Val," Micah said soothingly. "Now, release him, slowly."

It was a whole lot easier to do than I expected, since Lola was thoroughly pleased now. She gave one last caress to his second chakra of sensuality and Shade shuddered. Lola withdrew, happy and content.

WAS IT GOOD FOR YOU, TOO? Fang drawled. BET SHADE WANTS A CIGARETTE RIGHT ABOUT NOW.

Shut up. I felt mortified enough without his help. "I'm so sorry, Shade. Are you okay?"

He shook his head. "Quite well, thank you," he said, though his voice sounded a little shaky. He released his death hold on the arms of the chairs, though, so I guess that was a good sign.

"You did fine," Micah said encouragingly. "With a little practice, you should be able to control it as well as I can. I bet you won't lack for volunteers, will she, Shade?"

"Definitely not," Shade said in a breathy voice.

I felt my neck turn hot. I wasn't used to this kind of attention.

“Okay,” Micah said decisively. “Now that you’re sated, let’s try another exercise to help you control the lust demon inside you.” He glanced at Shade and Fang and gestured to the door. “If you two wouldn’t mind waiting outside? She needs as few distractions as possible.”

They left, and Micah set a tall candle on the table in front of me and lit it.

“What’s that for?”

“It’s to help you find control.”

“How?” Though I really wanted to learn how to control my demon, I still felt a little weird about what I’d done to Shade. Not that he seemed to mind, but I would like to manage the intensity better, so I wouldn’t embarrass him in the future. How could a candle possibly help with that?

Micah dimmed the lights. “Stare into the flame.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “You’re kidding, right? Do you really think that will help?”

“I really do. And how do you know it won’t unless you try it?”

“Okay, okay.” I stared into the flame, thinking about bailing, but I’d stupidly agreed to do as Micah asked. And why was that again? Oh yeah, because it was supposed to help me with my so-called “gift.” Though how staring into a small bit of fire would help control Lola, I had no idea.

“Try,” Micah insisted, as if he’d read my mind. “Blank your mind and think of nothing.”

I sighed and did as he said. But thinking of nothing was like trying *not* to think of a pink elephant. All you’d get was rosy pachyderms cavorting around in your head.

“Watch the flame,” he said softly. “And go to a place inside you, a still quiet place where no one can reach you . . . not me, not Dan, not your mother, not even Lola.”

Now there was an attractive thought. But was there such a place? I’d tried finding it before, but was too easily distracted. Now, though, now that I’d fed on Shade, Lola had receded far into the background. I searched deeper . . . and deeper still. Somewhere, in the quiet of my soul, I found a tiny spot that seemed isolated, calm . . . whole.

I slipped into it and just drifted there, drinking in the incredible beauty of aloneness, of feeling safe, protected, and very much at peace.

Sometime later, I heard Micah’s voice as if from far away. “Val? Val, are you okay?”

I blinked and reluctantly withdrew from the safe place. As I focused on the candle, I realized it had burned down quite a bit while I visited Never Never Land. Clearing my suddenly clogged throat, I said, “Yeah, I’m okay. Really okay.” I’d been in some Zen-like fugue or something.

I gave him a sheepish grin. “Guess you were right. Not a sign of Lola anywhere. But I’m not sure how it will help. It’s not like I can carry a candle with me and ask every guy to wait while I stare into a flame and make like a yogi.”

“I don’t expect you to. Practice this alone until you can go to your space easily, and you’ll eventually be able to slip into it whenever you want. It’ll take time, but don’t worry, I’ll help and so will Shade. He’ll let you know when to reel it in. That way you can search for the thief together while you teach him to hunt vampires.”

I nodded. It made sense, and if it helped, I was willing to try it. But first I had to get over being squeamish about using Shade like that. “Did you talk to Ramirez about Shade joining the Special Crimes Unit?”

“Not yet. Two reasons. First, I’m not sure how he’ll feel about interacting with the rest of the SCU. He has a built-in advantage, but I don’t know if he’s willing to use it.”

Yeah, the boogie man factor could be a help in distracting the bad guys, but the good guys . . . not so much. “And second?”

“Second, he’ll only be able to help you if he can keep from losing his temper. If not, you’ll have to help control *him* because—”

A knock came at the door and Tessa peeked her head in. “Big problem, boss. One of your watchers at the downtown blood bank called in. Some vamps are going crazy and killing people. They need help.”

Fear thrilled through me. My God, it was broad daylight. They’d never been this bold before. “I’m on it.” Fang bounded into the room, looking ready for anything. But I wasn’t so sure about Shade, who’d followed the hellhound in. “You up for this?” I asked him.

He nodded sharply. “Gotta learn sometime. Let’s go.”

Try Me

Chapter Seven



Shade had his own motorcycle, a sweet blue Ducati that was practically a piece of art. He quickly pulled on gloves, leathers, and a black helmet with a dark-tinted visor. No wonder he rode a bike—he looked quite normal with all of his skin hidden.

I tried to help Fang with his goggles, but he said, NO TIME. LET’S ROCK AND ROLL, BABE.

Ooookay. I saw Micah jump into his car somewhere behind us but we left him in a nanosecond as we took off. We weaved in and out of traffic, Shade having no problem keeping up with me. I normally wouldn’t take the risk—it was the other drivers I was worried about, not me—but the fact that vamps were attacking during the daytime scared the crap out of me. What did it mean? Nothing good, I was sure.

We arrived together at the blood bank. Fang jumped off and Shade did, too, not bothering to take off any of his gear as he headed for the door.

Not good. He wasn’t trained. I swung off the bike and caught up to him at the hotel-turned-blood-bank. Grabbing his arm, I said, “Stay out of the way. You don’t know how to deal with them yet.”

“I can help,” Shade insisted. “If only as a healer.”

No time to argue. “Okay, but don’t fight. I don’t want to have to worry about protecting you.” Or having him lose his temper, though come to think of it, Micah had never actually explained why.

“Got it,” he said.

I opened the door to a madhouse. Normally, the waiting area was quiet, with people patiently waiting their turn to donate. But now, there was total mayhem. There were about a dozen people in the room, most of them screaming as blood stained the white tiled floors. Talk about sensory overload. I had to pause to assess the situation.

One vamp was down and staked, and two more were causing major problems as people tried either to shield them or kill them. The rivalry made sense. If the vampires had gone crazy and someone had tried to stop them by staking a bloodsucker or two, now the suckees were trying to protect the other vamps. Vampires tend to enthrall their willing meal tickets.

My eyes swiveled as a handsome and familiar form stepped into view. Good God, Dan was here. How'd he get here so fast? He was off-duty; he worked nights, like me. He, along with a demon who must be one of Micah's informants, were trying to flank a female vamp over by the cookies and orange juice without stepping on the humans passed out and bleeding on the floor.

In another group near me, I saw someone—Nicole—trying to get hysterical humans out the door.

"Help her," I told Shade.

On the other side of the lobby, a male vamp was crouched down on the floor, mad-eyed and glaring like a cornered animal, his fangs sunk into the neck of a limp teen girl.

Fang me! The girl was one of the blood bank's fresh-faced human volunteers, Brittany. I was shocked into immobility, shocked that I knew both the victim and the vamp. The vamp was Lorenzo—the one who had invited Dan and me to play in his fantasy woodland bower at the blood bank. What the hell was the matter with him?

Fury shone through his eyes as he held her like a broken doll. Her arms and legs splayed awkwardly, and blood dripped down her neck as he continued to suck.

"Lorenzo, stop!" I yelled. I was afraid to approach too closely, sick at the thought that he might tear her throat out. Brittany thought the New Blood Movement was all noble and courageous. Wonder what she thought now . . .

If she could think. Was she even still alive?

Lorenzo scabbled back into a corner with his prize, like a lion guarding its prey.

"Wait, Lorenzo," I pleaded, following cautiously. "Think about what you're doing." He was supposed to be one of the good guys. "You don't want this. Alejandro wouldn't like it."

THERE'S NO REASONING WITH HIM, Fang said. LORENZO'S NOT HOME ANYMORE.

"What do you mean?"

HE'S STARK, STARING BONKERS. A WHOLE SIX PACK SHY OF A CASE.

"Okay, buddy, if you want something to bite, bite me." I beckoned him with both hands, but he ignored me. I took a step forward and he clutched Brittany tighter.

Damn. What should I do? The screaming and jostling behind me scraped across my nerves. I jerked a vial of holy water out of my pocket, uncorked it and let it fly. The water hit the flesh on his arm and sizzled. He screamed, and Fang attacked his other arm, but the vamp still wouldn't let go of the girl.

TURN LOLA LOOSE, Fang shouted in my mind.

I hesitated only a moment then threw my arms out toward Lorenzo, trying with all my might to focus the succubus on him and only him. Since she'd fed earlier, it worked. I could feel her need slam into him, take total control of his body, and make him mine to command.

"Stop," I yelled. "Let Brittany go."

Though I could feel the madness churning within Lorenzo, Lola had a lock on him that he couldn't break. He froze, released the girl, and waited for my next order. Good, Lorenzo was taken care of.

But no time to worry about Brittany. First, I had to take care of the other vamp before more people were hurt. I spun around and saw that Dan and the demon had the female vamp cornered behind the refreshments table, but couldn't quite get to her. Or maybe the fact that she was female kept them from attacking.

I'd never seen her before. She looked preppy and well-fed, not the typical grunge-vamp types I saw on the streets. She also looked confused, uncertain, fangs dripping blood on her sweater and pencil skirt. But her vulnerable appearance wouldn't stop *me*.

"Need help?" I asked Dan, coming up beside him

"No. I can handle this. Call for back-up."

"I am back-up, you idiot."

But as he turned to say something, she leapt over the table and took off like a bat out of hell, zipping past him and heading for the door at a dead run. I spun to follow her, but she bowled over a middle-aged woman like she wasn't even there. And when Nicole and Shade made the mistake of getting in the vamp's way, she grabbed a chair and jabbed it into them.

Oh crap, they both went down. I couldn't stop to see how they were—I took off after her through the blood bank's lobby, afraid of how much more damage she could do. She was fast, but her high heels and her confusion slowed her down. Fang was faster. He scabbled across the tile like mad then took a flying leap and hit her square in the back before she could make it out the front door. She went down and I was on top of her, pulling a stake.

Dan caught up with me. "You should have let her go. It's daylight outside. She'd fry."

"Something's wrong with these vamps. They should be holed up, far away from any possibility of coming into contact with a stray sunbeam."

I glanced down at the vamp. She wasn't fighting back—it was more like she was clawing at something just in front of her face. Though I had her pinned, it was like she didn't even see me.

Dan grabbed her head, the silver in his bracelet blistering the side of her face. "What are you waiting for? Stake her, or I'll drag her outside."

I lifted a stake. The blood bank's main door burst open. "Slayer, hold!"

I stopped. Not because of the command, but because of who it had come from. Alejandro stood there, looking menacing yet concerned with his cape draped over him to keep the sunlight at bay.

“Why?”

He took a graceful step to the side, out of the light, and lowered his cape. “Wait, please. She is one of mine.”

“She’s sure not acting like it,” I snapped.

“I can take care of her.” He knelt next to her and touched the tips of his fingers to her forehead. She relaxed and lay still, as if she had fainted.

Dan and I let her go and rose to our feet. “How’d you do that?” I asked Alejandro.

He waved a hand dismissively. “She is one of mine, so she is under the command of my touch.”

WHOA, Fang said. YOU LEARN SOMETHING NEW EVERY DAY.

Yep.

“Did you order this massacre, bloodsucker?” Dan growled.

Gently, Alejandro said, “I am not your enemy.”

“He’s right,” I told Dan. “He’s obviously trying to help.”

Dan made a sound of disgust. “Oh yeah? Tell them that.” His abrupt gesture encompassed the carnage in the room . . . the moans, the fallen, the blood.

Alejandro glanced around, looking appalled. “What happened here?”

Dan thrust an impatient hand through his hair. “Three of your minions—Roger, Lorenzo and the girl—”

“Corina.”

“—came out of the elevator and started attacking people. They called the SCU, but no one’s on shift yet. We’ve never had vampires attack humans during the daytime, before.” Dan looked at me. “How did you get here so fast?”

“Micah,” I said, without explaining more. He knew Micah had demons working undercover at the blood banks. Dan nodded, and the watcher in question inclined his head at me then did his best to melt into the background to help with the wounded. “Why were *you* here?” I asked.

“I was showing my new partner—” He broke off and looked around wildly then blanched when he saw her lying unmoving on the floor. “Nic!”

Her shoulder was impaled on one leg of the chair. As Dan dropped beside her, the SCU pick-up unit came in, bringing medics with them. “Help her,” Dan ordered one of them then went to assist the other victims.

“Check on Brittany, too,” I said, and pointed to the girl, who lay still and pale.

I glanced around for Shade, my heart suddenly in my throat. He was sitting up against a wall, holding his helmeted head in his hands, the visor cracked from the force of the vamp's blow. Even a part-demon who seemed to be all shadow had a physical body that could bleed.

HE'S ALL RIGHT, Fang assured me.

Relieved, I turned back to Alejandro, who stepped over strewn bodies to look down at the vamp who'd been staked. "How could this have happened?" he asked wearily. "Roger was such an avid supporter of the Movement. As were Lorenzo and Corina."

"That's what I'd like to know," I said, my voice hard.

Alejandro shook his head and moved over to stand beside Brittany and the medic. "Sorry, she's gone," the medic said, then closed her eyes and glared at Alejandro.

The vamp leader stared down at Brittany, looking extremely saddened. Taking a deep breath, he gestured at Lorenzo, who was staring at me as if I were a lake in the middle of a parched desert. "Do you have him enthralled?"

"It seemed like the thing to do," I drawled, trying not to sound defensive. Strange, though, I hadn't realized I was still controlling him.

Alejandro knelt and placed his fingers against Lorenzo's forehead. He slumped like Corina had. Lola let him go without a peep. I turned to Alejandro. "What will you do with them?"

"Confine them until we can learn what happened. They do not appear to be themselves."

"Oh, yeah? Who are they, then? What have they turned into?"

I don't know what I expected him to answer, but it wasn't with a thoughtful look and a murmured, "I don't know."

As the SCU medics began loading up patients, I said, "Unless you want a whole lot of trouble from the general public, you might want to change the memories of the survivors."

Alejandro nodded, concentrated a moment, then was done. Spooky how easy that had been for him.

Dan followed the guys carrying Nic out the door. Dang, was it my fault she was hurt? If only I'd helped him train her, even a little—

VAL, COME HERE, Fang said urgently. SOMETHING'S WRONG WITH SHADE.

I whirled around and saw that Shade was on his hands and knees with his visor open, vomiting on the floor. I hurried over and blocked everyone else's view of his face. "Are you all right?"

"Huh?" Shade asked.

HE'S CONFUSED. HE MAY HAVE A CONCUSSION.

One of the medics came over and said, "Let's get that helmet off him."

Fang and I both moved to shield Shade and I said, "No, you can't." I couldn't let him see Shade as he really was.

Fang nudged me. YOU COULD HOLD HIS HAND AND HE'D LOOK NORMAL.

Maybe, but only as long as I was holding it. As soon as I let go or they took off with him, his secret would be out.

Surprised, the medic asked, "Why not?"

Ah, hell. Which was worse . . . revealing his secret to the SCU guys or letting him go untreated with possible life-threatening injuries?

Fang growled. I DON'T LIKE EITHER ONE OF THOSE OPTIONS. PICK DOOR NUMBER THREE.

I agreed. "Trust me," I told the medic. "I'll make sure he's taken care of." But what else could I do? Oh yes, I knew—

Micah strode in. "What happened?" he demanded of Alejandro. "Why did they attack?"

The only clue to the vamp leader's reaction was the tightening of his lips. "I have no idea. But I shall get to the bottom of it." He paused, then said deliberately, "Are you certain one of *your* people did not cause this?"

Just what we needed—more testosterone. Micah bristled, but before he could sling his own accusation, I said, "Micah, Shade's hurt. Do you know of any doctors who can treat him?"

Micah looked horrified as he studied Shade's hunched body. He lowered his voice so only I could hear. "No. Our only healer is . . . Shade himself."

"Well, I know one more possibility," I said.

Without another glance at Alejandro or the rest of the mess, Micah and the demon informant got Shade to Micah's Lexus and laid him gently in the back seat. Fang and the demon crowded into the seat beside him. They promised to watch him closely and keep him comfortable.

"Follow me," I said, and took off on my Valkyrie as soon as Micah started his engine.

I prayed like hell Gwen was as open-minded as she seemed. She was our only hope.

Try Me

Chapter Eight



When I got to the townhouse, I scanned the parking lot. Good—Gwen’s car sat in its usual spot.

Micah parked beside me and rolled down the window. “Why are we *here*?”

“Gwen is a nurse at the ER,” I explained. “She can help.”

“She’s *human*,” Micah protested, and the other demon looked a little skeptical.

“Yes, but she’s Dan’s sister—she knows what I am, knows what Fang is, and has seen the results of the vamps’ attacks. She’s cool.”

Micah glanced uncertainly at the other demon. Now that there was less going on, I registered that the watcher was young, with milky-white skin, short wavy dark hair, and fine features with piercing blue eyes . . . almost inhumanly pretty. I didn’t remember seeing him before.

Fang added, VAL’S RIGHT—GWEN’S COOL. AND WHAT OTHER CHOICE DO WE HAVE?

“I guess one of us could keep skin contact with him, so she won’t see him in his demon state,” Micah said.

I shook my head. “Not sure that’s such a good idea. She needs to know he’s not entirely human to help him.”

“You could compel her,” Micah told his informant.

Really? What kind of demon was he?

A DREAM DEMON, Fang said. HE CAN ENTER PEOPLE’S DREAMS AND CHANGE THEM, OR MAKE THEM BELIEVE THAT A REAL EXPERIENCE WAS A DREAM. OH, AND HIS NAME IS KYLE.

I quirked an eyebrow at my hellhound. *Sometimes you’re helpful to have around.*

MAKE THAT ALWAYS, AND I'LL AGREE WITH YOU.

Micah thought for a moment. "All right, we'll chance your friend. Val, can you get the door?"

"Sure."

I opened the door of the townhouse and saw Gwen exercising along with a DVD, wearing loose yoga pants and a tank top.

"Gwen, I need your help."

She continued to exercise and turned toward me. "Can it wait—" She stopped when she saw Micah and Kyle helping Shade through the front door. "What's going on?"

"This is a friend of mine," I blurted out. "He was hit in the head and needs medical care." I gestured the guys down the hall. "Take him to my room, first door on the right." Fang led the way.

Gwen turned off the DVD and followed us, looking confused and concerned. "If he's hurt, you should take him to the emergency room," she said as the guys laid Shade down on my bed, his helmet and gloves still on.

"Can't. He's . . . different."

Gwen looked wary. "Different how?"

"Don't worry, he won't hurt you. But he has special . . . abilities that make him . . ." Ah, hell. How could I explain this? Forget it—let her see for herself. "Can you help him off with his helmet?" I asked Micah and Kyle.

They started to do as I asked, but Gwen pushed Kyle aside. "No, let me look first." She lifted up his cracked visor before we could stop her and gasped, then jumped backward away from the bed. "What the . . .?"

"It's okay," I soothed her. I stripped off one of Shade's gloves and held his hand, skin to skin so the dark ribbons of light would stop pulsing across his face. "Look again."

She moved forward cautiously and peered into the visor, sighing in relief when she could see his face. "What did you do?" she asked me, then shook her head. "Never mind."

Gwen probed Shade's forehead carefully with her fingers then nodded at Micah and Kyle. "Take the helmet off, gently."

They did as she asked. Shade looked totally pale, with a bruise and lump forming at the top of his forehead. She checked his eyes, checked him over for other injuries, and fired questions at him.

Shade admitted he had lost consciousness for a short period of time and felt dizzy, nauseous and tired.

At Fang's prompting, I added, "He threw up, too, and seems really confused."

Gwen nodded decisively. "It looks like he has an MTBI."

“A what?” Medical terminology was so not my thing.

“Mild traumatic brain injury,” Gwen explained.

Alarm rang through me and I jerked back.

Some of my panic must have shown on my face, for Gwen shook her head and laid her hand reassuringly on mine. “Sorry for the jargon. It just means he has a mild concussion.” She glanced down at the bed where Shade had reverted to his swirly personality now that I was no longer holding his hand. “At least, that’s what I’d say of a human.”

All of a sudden, Shade’s appearance flipped back into that of a human for a second then back again to swirly shadow demon.

“Whoa, that’s not normal,” Kyle said.

“What *is* normal for him?” Gwen asked.

“Normally he looks fully human only when someone is touching him skin to skin,” I explained.

He blitzed off and on again, like a television on the fritz.

Gwen backed away, holding up her hands. “I have no idea how to treat this. I don’t even understand it.”

Kyle laid a hand on Micah’s shoulder. “What about the encyclopedia? Maybe it will explain.”

Oh yeah, the books. I glanced at Fang, remembering our mission. *What is Kyle thinking about the books?*

Fang cocked his head and stared at Kyle. ONLY THAT THEY MIGHT HELP. HE DIDN’T STEAL THEM.

Seeing that Micah was floundering for an answer that wouldn’t admit the books were missing, I said, “I don’t remember reading anything medical about shadow demons, but maybe Tessa can check.”

Micah nodded, thanking me with his eyes. “I’ll ask her.” He turned to address Gwen. “He’s mostly human. Can you treat him as you would a human and hope the rest of him follows?”

Gwen stared down at Shade uncertainly, looking a bit creeped out by his blinking in and out. It kind of freaked me out, too, so I grabbed his hand to bring him wholly into this reality. “Please?” I asked her. “He’s a healer himself . . . he’s the one who healed Dan’s shoulder.”

Gwen looked surprised. “When?”

“A couple of weeks ago. Didn’t Dan tell you?”

One corner of her mouth turned up in a wry grin. “He never tells me when he’s hurt. Doesn’t want to worry his baby sister, I guess.”

I nodded. That definitely sounded like the macho kind of thing Dan would do. “He owes Micah a favor for it,” I hinted.

“Well, Dan will have to pay back his own favor,” she said briskly. “This one’s on me.”

Shade raised his head slightly. “Thank you,” he whispered. “I will be in your debt.”

“Don’t be silly,” Gwen said. “This is my job.” She pushed him gently back down on the bed and asked him, “Do you have any clues how to treat yourself?”

A ghost of a smile flickered across his face. “Micah’s suggestion is sound. “

“Well, there isn’t a whole lot I’d do anyway. Let’s put some ice on that bump, give him lots of fluids and rest, and monitor him to make sure he doesn’t get worse.”

Shade looked apologetic. “I feel less sick when someone keeps me grounded in this reality.”

Micah nodded. “I’ll make sure someone stays with you.”

Fang poked me. MICAH ASKED ME TO PASS ON A MESSAGE TO YOU AND SHADE. HE FIGURES IF HE SENDS PEOPLE TO VISIT SHADE WHO WERE AT THE PARTY, SHADE CAN DISCUSS THE BOOKS AND I CAN READ THEIR MIND TO SEE IF THEY’RE GUILTY.

Good idea.

Shade jerked and glanced at Fang then nodded. Hmm, maybe I should coach the shadow demon a bit on how to hide his feelings, or he’d give us away.

YEAH, Fang agreed. HEY, IF SHADE’S GONNA STAY HERE, MAYBE YOU COULD BRING PRINCESS OVER SO SHE CAN HELP WITH THE MIND-READING WHILE I’M NOT HERE.

I glanced at Fang. *And you have a totally innocent motive, right?*

HELL NO. I WANNA MAKE SOME TIME WITH MY WOMAN.

I resisted the urge to laugh out loud. It was a good idea anyway. “Gwen, would it be okay if Shade stayed here for awhile? And brought his dog? She’s small and very well-mannered.”

“Uh, sure,” Gwen said.

“Thank you,” Shade said and winced as if the act of speaking had been painful.

Gwen looked sympathetic. “We could also give you something for the pain. Can you take acetaminophen?”

“Yes. But I’ll need twice the normal dosage for it to be effective.”

“Okay.” Gwen glanced at me. “Can you help me find it, Val?”

“Sure.” But I knew she didn’t really need help. I followed her out of the room and as soon as we were out of Shade’s earshot, I said, “I’m sorry. I know I should’ve asked you first if it was okay . . . especially with all the people that will be traipsing through here. Is it a problem for Shade to stay here? I’ll sleep on the couch.”

She rummaged in her medicine cabinet and tossed me a grin. “Not if all his friends are as hot as these guys. There’s a whole shopping mall of eye candy in there.”

“Not all his friends are,” I said, smiling. “And some are actually women. So what’s the problem?”

She grabbed the bottle she was looking for and grimaced. “It’s my overprotective brother. I just wanted to warn you that Dan won’t like it.”

We were still close enough for Fang to overhear our conversation from the other room. WHO CARES? he asked.

Unfortunately, I cared. That must be what that sinking feeling meant in the pit of my stomach. But Dan was already so unhappy with me that one more thing shouldn’t make a difference. However, I did need to let Gwen know what was really going on before she consented to this. Quickly, I had Fang relay my intention to Micah. “I know Dan won’t like it. And he’ll like what I’m about to tell you even less.”

Micah came to join us in the living room and we explained to Gwen about the missing encyclopedia and our intention to use this as an opportunity to find the thief.

“There should be no danger to you,” Micah assured Gwen. “If Fang or Princess learn the thief’s identity, they won’t confront him. They’ll let Shade know and he can call one of us.”

Gwen nodded thoughtfully. “And will there be any danger to Shade while he’s convalescing?”

“There shouldn’t be,” Micah assured her. “The thief won’t know his identity has been compromised.”

“But since people will have to keep in contact with him to keep him from getting sick, they’ll be able to see his expression. And he hasn’t learned yet to keep his expression from giving his thoughts away,” I reminded Micah.

“Good point. I’ll ask Fang and Princess not to tell him until after the thief leaves. Even if the thief does suspect, the hellhounds should be able to protect him. And Shade isn’t totally without defenses himself. He must have been caught off guard to get this hurt.”

Yeah, the incredible speed of a crazed vampire would do that to you. Plus Shade had been distracted by helping innocents. “How long will Shade need to rest?” I asked Gwen.

She shrugged. “In a human, I’d say they should take it easy for a week or two, limiting their activity and not doing anything strenuous to see how it goes. But I have no idea how that will translate to Shade.”

“Neither will anyone else,” Micah said. “I’ll ask Shade to continue playing sick until we’ve interviewed everyone. Will that be a problem for you?” he asked Gwen.

“No. And what my big brother doesn’t know can’t hurt him.”

“He does live in the complex,” I reminded her. “And he comes to visit you a lot. He’s bound to find out sooner or later.”

Gwen shrugged. “He hasn’t been by much lately.” I winced, knowing that was because of me. Gwen laid a hand on my arm. “But that’s okay. I’ll deal with him when it happens.”

Better her than me.

Micah thanked her, holding her hand in both of his own. His sincerity made her glow with pleasure. When she left to take the painkiller to Shade, Micah lowered his voice. “I’m doing this only to rule my people out. I still think it was one of Alejandro’s. After all, the books give a great deal of information about our strengths and weaknesses. Think how much leverage that would give them in ensuring we do as they wish.”

“Good point. And it’s time I check that out.” It was dark by now, so maybe Alejandro was receiving visitors. He’d given me his personal number after I helped him out with Lily. Relieved to have something I could actually *do*, I called him.

He answered right away. “How may I help you, Ms. Shapiro?”

Whoa. Don’t think anyone had ever called me that before. Weird. “Considering everything that just happened, is this a bad time?”

He sighed. “It is not a good one, but I am certain you have questions for me.”

Yes, and about more than he thought. “Can I come talk to you? I don’t want to do this over the phone.”

“Of course. I am at home and shall instruct the guards to let you pass. You already have the combination to the gates,” he added drily.

Uh, yeah. A small matter of breaking and entering. But it had been in a good cause and ended well for everyone. “Okay, I’m coming right over.”

When I turned off the phone, Micah said, “Can you leave Fang here with Shade while I pick up Princess and some of his things? I’ll arrange for people to stay with him in shifts.”

“Sure.” As an invited guest, so to speak, I shouldn’t be in any danger at the vamp mansion. I tossed a thought to Fang to let him know what was going on, then let Gwen know I was leaving for awhile.

Sheesh, I’d wanted friends, but now I was going to have a constant parade of them through my *bedroom*, for heaven’s sake. I hadn’t realized how much stress having real friends could be. More people to help . . . and protect.

I felt relieved at being able to escape, and guilty for feeling that way. Then again, we all did what we could. I wasn’t much help at a sick bed, but questioning bloodsuckers was right up my alley. And if I got to pound on a few, that would be even better.

GOOD, Fang said. GO KICK ONE FOR ME.

Try Me

Chapter Nine



One of Alejandro's lieutenants, the cowboy vamp, Austin, answered the door at the mansion and grinned at me. "Well, hello, darlin'," he said, tipping back his Stetson. "Coming through the front door this time?"

I shrugged. "Thought I'd try something different."

"And are you aimin' to expose more corruption in our fine organization this day?"

He seemed so amused, I wasn't quite sure how to take him. True, he had no personal reason to dislike me, but I had killed a few of his kind. "It's possible," I said briefly. "How are Lorenzo and Corina doing?"

His smile died. "They're still a mite bit troubled," he admitted.

"Sorry to hear that. Uh, Alejandro is expecting me."

"Sure thing. This way."

He took me to the study and waved me to a seat. "He'll be right along."

I nodded and he left the room. I glanced around, noticing that Alejandro had removed the rug I'd soaked with Lily's blood and replaced it with a blood-red one. Good planning. The rest of the study was about the same—all old-fashioned and masculine looking.

I was only alone for a few minutes before Alejandro came in and shut the door softly behind him. He seated himself at his desk, looking wiped. "What may I do for you?"

"Do you *really* have *no* idea what happened at the blood bank? Why your people . . ." I hesitated, not certain how to finish that sentence politely.

Alejandro did it for me. "Went mad?"

Well, yeah. I nodded.

He sighed. “Not yet. When I allow them to awake from my thrall, they are not present in their own minds.”

Whatever that meant. “Do you think that’ll change?”

“I hope so.” Alejandro leaned forward, clasping his hands on his desk and staring into my eyes. “But that is not why you’ve come. Tell me, what would you have of me?”

“The other night, at the social event . . .”

“Of course. Have you come to talk to me about the demons’ reaction?”

“Uh, no. Something else. But this is in confidence . . .”

He nodded.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Something went missing that evening.”

“*What* went missing?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“And how does that concern me?” From the steel in his voice, I had a feeling he knew what I was about to say.

“It was stolen during the chaos.” His expression turned hard and I assured him, “Micah is investigating all of *his* people, but I was hoping you’d let me question those of yours who were there, too.”

“And would you take their word alone for their innocence?” he asked, his tone dangerous.

“Would *you*?” I countered. After all, Lily had been one of his lieutenants, yet he hadn’t suspected her disloyalty.

“I suppose not.”

“If they try to control me, I can read their minds. Can you ask them to do that?”

“They won’t be happy.” He gave me a wry look. “After what happened, they fear you and the demon inside you. But if you promise to only ask about that one thing and not reveal anything else you learn in their minds, I will agree.”

“You got it,” I agreed. “I’m only interested in finding out about the—about that one thing.”

“And if one of them admits to having this item that’s missing, what then?”

“I’ll ask them to return it,” I said innocently. Of course, if they refused, all bets were off. I didn’t say it aloud but Alejandro was no dummy. He caught the gist.

He sighed again. “Very well. I shall call all of them to me so you may question them.”

Wow, I didn’t know he had those kind of powers. “You can do that?”

He gave me an odd look, then tapped the cell phone lying on his desk. “With this, yes.”

Oh. Duh. Feeling stupid, I said, “Okay, thanks.”

Some were already at the mansion, and others were out and about, so Alejandro had Austin contact them all—only about a dozen.

The first was another one of Alejandro’s lieutenants, Luis. He wasn’t as nice as Austin. In fact, I’d bet he’d been a snobby aristocrat before he was turned. Dark-skinned, with a thin goatee and long hair clubbed back into a ponytail, he could out-snoot anyone I’d ever met. He regarded me with a sneer when Alejandro asked him to try to control me.

I expected some reluctance, but instead, he viciously slammed his mind into mine and tried to take over. It didn’t work, of course. Now that he’d done that, I could read his mind. But I’d promised not to go fishing, so I simply asked, “What did you do the night of the social at the Demon Underground?”

I received quick images of the fight, his pleasure in slamming Ludwig against the wall, and his disappointment when Alejandro made him stop. And he made sure I knew he was disgusted with Micah’s wimpiness in not outing the demons. He also blamed him for Lorenzo and Carina’s condition, though he had no evidence or proof.

Unfortunately, he knew nothing of the books. Too bad. He was dangerous. One of Alejandro’s less likable underlings. I wouldn’t mind taking him down. “Thank you,” I said. “That’s all I needed.”

Alejandro gave him a warning glance. “When the others arrive, have them come in, but do not mention why. Do you understand?”

Luis sneered again but gave his boss a curt nod and left without a word.

The others provided no surprise. Their answers were mostly the same. Though they were uneasy about sharing their thoughts with me, they had no knowledge of the missing books. Crap. With the vamps eliminated, that meant the thief was probably a demon. Micah was not going to be happy.

When the last of his people left, Alejandro said, “I take it you did not find what you were looking for?”

“No, but they all seemed pretty ticked off at the demons for not wanting to be outed along with you.” They wanted to spread the wealth of any possible fallout. Couldn’t blame them for that.

“It’s a sore spot,” he conceded. “In hindsight, I realize I should have let Micah know of my plans first, to smooth the way.”

Yeah, Alejandro’s love of the dramatic had put him in trouble this time. “Well, you might want to work on calming some of them down unless you want a war on your hands.”

He nodded wearily. “There is only one you have not yet tested. Myself.”

I didn’t need to. The vamp leader had been within my sight the entire time. “That won’t be necessary,” I said, hoping he’d think it was because I trusted him.

He raised an eyebrow but didn't comment. Instead, he surprised me by asking, "How would you like to come work for the New Blood Movement?"

"Huh?" I responded stupidly.

He leaned forward. "Thanks to you, I have an opening for a new lieutenant in my organization. Your ability would come in very handy to smoke out any other traitors, ensure everyone who joins the movement is genuine, protect our interests among the demons and with the humans in the SCU."

Okay, I *still* felt stupid, 'cause I sure couldn't figure out why he was asking *me*. "You do realize that I work for the SCU, right? That I'm called the Slayer because I kill people like you?"

"Not people like me," he said with a smile. "People like those vampires who are not in my organization. And the fact that you called us *people* is very telling."

It was? I didn't know how to respond to that, so I said nothing.

"I'll double whatever the SCU is paying you."

"I don't do it for the money," I protested.

"I know, but having some extra cash doesn't hurt. What do you say?"

I wanted to blurt out an instant "no," but his offer was a little tempting. Not have to work with Dan, or be treated like a freak anymore by the normal humans . . . ?

No, if I went to work for Alejandro I'd be shunned as a murderer by his vamps and as a traitor by the demons and the San Antonio police department. How was that any better?

But before I could respond either way, he added, "Why don't you think about it and get back to me?"

I couldn't see myself working for him in any future I could envision, but there was no sense in turning him down right away. It wouldn't hurt to let him think I was considering it. "Okay. And thank you very much for letting me question your people about the . . . missing item," I said, trying to be diplomatic for a change. Micah would be proud of me.

The leader of the New Blood Movement inclined his head. "This was but a small favor. I am still in your debt."

Okay. Not sure how he kept score, but I wasn't going to argue when the outcome was to my advantage. He rose to walk me to the front door. At first I wondered if it was to ensure I didn't wander places I shouldn't, but no, he was probably just doing the gentlemanly thing.

He opened the door to escort me out, but halted as Austin hurried into the hallway waving a cell phone. "There's something wrong at the Fort Sam blood bank."

Oh, crap. Another blood bank, another vamp gone mad? "What kind of trouble?" I asked.

But Alejandro said, "Let's go," and practically flew to the limo parked in the driveway. Austin jumped in the driver's seat and they took off.

Worried about who might get hurt, I jumped on the back of my motorcycle and zoomed after them. The blood bank was just outside Fort Sam Houston, in another of San Antonio's old hotels that had been converted to a new purpose. On my bike, I might be able to get there faster than Alejandro.

I did get there first, but a teenaged preppy type was guarding the door, holding her arms outstretched in front of it. "I'm sorry, the blood bank is closed tonight," she told a man who was trying to get in. She looked a bit freaked out. Whatever was going on in there, a human volunteer like her shouldn't have to deal with it. Look what had happened to Brittany . . .

The man tried to push his way past, but she was determined to stop him. Before he could get too physical, I let Lola loose and she wrapped her wiles around him. Just like that, he was mine to command. I had a crazy urge to wave my hand in front of his face and intone, "These are not the droids you want," but stopped myself. Fang's love for pop culture references was a bad influence.

Instead, I said, "The blood bank is closed. Go home." I could feel him enjoying Lola's caress. Eeeww.

Obediently, he left. I wished I could wipe away the feel of his mind. The girl thanked me, but seemed determined to keep me out as well. Too bad I couldn't use Lola on *her*. Not wanting to hurt her, I flashed my SCU badge and said, "Police." When she still hesitated, I added, "Alejandro is right behind me."

His name acted like an "Open sesame," and she let me pass without further argument. Inside, it wasn't as bad as I feared. The place was totally trashed, but there were no bodies and no pools of blood. Only two guys facing off about ten feet apart, one short and bald, with fangs bared. They were both breathing hard and looked like they'd been fighting for some time. Strangely, there were scorch marks on the wall . . . and on the bloodsucker. I recognized the non-vamp—Andrew, the surly redheaded demon from the party.

"You killed Veronica," Andrew yelled, and his eyes flashed purple as he punched straight out from his shoulder toward the vamp, a small fireball sizzling from his fist.

Baldy ducked, and the fireball splashed against the marble wall, singeing it.

"Andrew, stop," I yelled. He was a fire demon with a bad temper . . . two things that did not go well together.

The vamp darted a sneering glance at me. "Slayer," he said with contempt. "Come to help your friend? It figures."

"No, I've come to stop the two of you from making asses of yourselves. Looks like I'm too late."

Andrew snarled and clenched his hand into a fist again, turning toward me.

"I'd reconsider, Andrew, if I were you."

I let Lola loose, just enough to remind them what I could do. "Do you really want me to turn you both into mindless love slaves?"

Both guys backed off, but they didn't look happy about it. I relaxed a little. Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as I thought. "What's going on? Who started this?" I asked.

“He started it,” Andrew muttered.

The bald vamp pointed at Andrew. “I caught your friend here spying on us.”

I shrugged. “So?”

The bloodsucker looked startled. “So? What do you mean, *so*? He was *spying*.”

I shook my head and placed my hands on my hips. “Let me get this straight. You ask the demons to come out of the closet with you, ask them to trust you with their biggest secrets, then expect them not to come check you out and see how you operate?”

Both guys looked a little surprised. “Yeah,” Andrew said to the vamp, with a smirk. “Ditto what she said.” Though he was willing to go along with my story, I suspected there was more to this fight than he wanted to admit.

I turned on him. “And you—you say you want to keep our existence a secret, yet you practically set this whole hotel on fire?”

Andrew and the vamp both looked sheepish now. Geez, I felt like the grown-up in this situation. How messed up was that? I shook my head. “If you want the other side to take you seriously, you both need to practice what you preach.”

The bald guy started to protest but a voice behind me cut him off. “That’s enough, Vincent,” Alejandro said. “You are both culpable in this matter.”

I turned around and saw Alejandro watching, with Austin lounging against the wall and cleaning his nails with the tip of a knife. “How long have you been there?” I asked.

Alejandro smiled. “Long enough to see that the Slayer doesn’t always resort to killing or enthrallment to win the day.”

I *had* done well, hadn’t I? It was kind of nice to settle things with reason for a change. Dang, where was Fang when I needed an “Attagirl?”

Austin gestured casually with his knife. “So, is there any other unresolved business between you two boys?”

Andrew looked mulish. “I—”

The door to the back rooms burst open and two male vamps surged out, looking wild. They headed straight for Andrew and me. What the—? They had the crazed looks I’d seen on Lorenzo’s face. I yanked Andrew out of the way and was about to pull a stake when Alejandro yelled, “Stop them from attacking the demons!”

Austin and Vincent flew past me and slammed into the two unhinged vamps. In a blur of motion, they each pinned a vamp to the wall and held them there while Alejandro flew to their sides to place his fingers against the temples of the wild vamps, one after the other. They slumped to the ground.

“Yours, I take it?” I asked drily.

Alejandro gazed at the two sprawled vamps, his expression sad. “Yes.”

“What’s the matter with them?” Vincent asked.

“The same thing that happened to Corina and Lorenzo,” Alejandro said softly.

Austin shook his head. “This is not good.”

An understatement, but it could have been much worse. We were lucky Alejandro was on the scene. “Vamps suddenly turning into rabid animals at two different blood banks?” I said. “Does that suggest a pattern to you?”

“It does,” Alejandro said. Glancing at Austin, he added, “Close the blood banks down. All of them.”

Austin tipped his hat. “You got it, boss.”

I glanced around. Vincent was dragging one of the zonked-out vamps to the limo outside, and Andrew was nowhere to be seen. He must have sneaked out. Probably off to tell Micah his version of events before I could. Well, good luck with that.

“Close down the blood banks?” I asked. “You think the problem is in the donated blood?”

“It appears that way. I shall do a thorough investigation.”

“Uh, how are you going to get your blood supplies in the meantime?” Would the lack of donations doom the New Blood Movement and their lofty goal of not sucking on *unwilling* humans?

“Let me worry about that. I assure you, we will not harm anyone. I won’t allow it.”

Yeah, right. “I believe that’s what you *intend* to do, but how long can you go on this way? And can you speak for *all* of your people?”

“Yes. And we shall go on as long as we need to until we can find out what kind of tainted blood is causing this madness and stop it.”

His tone was uncompromising, final. Instead of arguing with him, I went back to another subject. “Did you hear Andrew accuse Vincent of killing someone?”

Alejandro sighed. “Yes. And, before you ask, we shall question Vincent together. While we wait, tell me, have you considered my job offer?”

Only for a fleeting moment. “Uh, you were serious about that?” I asked.

“Very.”

“Um, I don’t think so. I’m happy with where I am.” Well, not happy, precisely, but at least it had to be better than working with the vamps, no matter how nice Alejandro and Austin were.

He nodded, looking disappointed but not surprised. “Very well, but the offer is still open if you should ever change your mind.”

Thankfully I didn’t have to answer that because the bald vamp came back in. Turning to him, Alejandro said, “Vincent, please try to control Ms. Shapiro’s mind.”

Vincent looked uncertainly at me, but when I nodded, he did as Alejandro asked, so I was able to read his mind. “Go ahead and ask him,” I told Alejandro.

“What happened here between you and the fire demon?” Alejandro asked.

Vincent shrugged. “I was seeing clients and noticed the redhead had been sitting here for hours, but hadn’t been called to donate. I asked the receptionist, and she said he was waiting for someone. It seemed suspicious so I asked him what he was doing here. He became angry and attacked me, accusing me of killing someone named Veronica. All I did was defend myself.”

Vincent was telling the truth. “And *did* you kill this Veronica?” I asked.

“No,” he said, sounding bewildered. “I’ve never killed anyone.”

I nodded at Alejandro. He was telling the truth about that, too. Then again, the fact that he was still here while Andrew had sneaked out probably would have made me believe him instead of Andrew, anyway. I released his mind.

“Thank you, Vincent,” Alejandro said. “Please wait in the limo with Austin.”

When Vincent left, I said, “I’m sure Andrew was acting on his own—I’ll let Micah know what happened.”

“Thank you. And please assure him that I will do everything I can to find out what is causing this madness in my people. Obviously, something is tainting the blood they drink, and I must test it, find out what it is.”

“Do you have someone who can do that?” I could ask Gwen for a lab recommendation, but that might be stretching the limits of what she’d be able . . . or willing . . . to do.

“I do. The Movement has friends in many places.”

Good to know. “Do you think this is deliberate?”

“Yes, I do. Someone is targeting our blood banks. The only question is, who? And why?”

“Who has reason to? Maybe those free-agent vamps who want to keep killing humans?”

He thought for a moment, then said, “It’s unlikely. They would be more likely to *steal* our supply of blood than poison it.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “With Micah’s people present at both blood bank incidents, it leaves me to wonder . . .”

I winced. “I know it looks suspicious, but Micah is *not* behind this.” Though that didn’t mean all of his demons were guilt-free. “I know the demon at the first incident didn’t start that trouble. We’ll make sure to question the fire demon about the confrontation here.”

“It can’t be a mere coincidence that these blood bank attacks began so soon after Micah’s gathering, where we announced our intention to reveal ourselves to the world.”

He was right. The fact that Andrew had been at the party when the encyclopedia had been stolen wasn’t lost on me either. Did the books have something in them that showed how to poison vampires through the blood they drank? I didn’t remember reading anything about that, but I hadn’t read the whole set of books, either.

I knew this much: So far the evidence hinted that a demon was responsible for drugging or poisoning—whatever you wanted to call it—the vamps. “We have been questioning our own kind, just like I’ve been questioning your guys,” I assured him.

Alejandro’s eyes narrowed. “You’re questioning everyone about an item that was stolen . . . right after Micah announced the *Encyclopedia Magicka* had been returned. *That’s* what’s missing, isn’t it?”

The surprise on my face must have answered for me. Alejandro said, “Of course. It must list the strengths and weaknesses of my people, including something that can poison their blood. That’s a very dangerous weapon to leave in anyone’s hands, much less an enemy’s.”

“Yes, we know. We haven’t let anyone else know it’s missing, and we’re doing everything we can to find out who took it and why. I know you don’t have any reason to believe me, but—”

“On the contrary, I do have reason to believe you.” At my surprised look, he added, “You are the one person respected and trusted by both sides. A part-demon who fights evil, a vampire slayer who can discriminate between the good and the bad . . . you are our best hope to avoid a war between my people and yours.”

That sounded way too much like, “Obi Wan, you’re our only hope.” I gulped. Crap—I was no Jedi Knight. Good thing Fang wasn’t here. He’d be laughing his butt off.

Alejandro smiled at my shell-shocked look. “I know it is a great deal of responsibility to lay on your shoulders, but won’t you help us?”

Find the missing encyclopedia, catch the person responsible for the blood poisoning, and avert an inter-species war? Oh sure, piece of cake.

Try Me

Chapter Ten



Even reluctant heroes needed to sleep and eat once in awhile, and it was time for me to do both. When I got home, I found Shade asleep on the couch, with Fang and Princess sacked out on the floor beneath the coffee table. The female demon watching Shade told me he'd insisted on leaving my bed free for me. I didn't see any sense in arguing with her and Gwen was in bed too, so I grabbed something to eat, texted Micah with my suspicions about Andrew, then crashed.

When I woke, it was to the delicious smell of frying sausage and the sound of laughter. I dressed, grabbed my phone, and followed my nose to the kitchen. Shade sat at the table along with two of his demon friends—Mood and Josh. Mood had her hand on Shade's to keep him grounded. Though Shade was normally pale—which came with being all blond and gorgeous and working at night—he wasn't as white as he'd looked yesterday, so I guessed he was feeling better.

Gwen was dishing out the sausage with her famous banana pecan pancakes and maple honey butter. Oh, my. "Any of those left?" I asked hopefully. Gwen's cooking was the best I'd ever tasted.

"Sure," she said with a grin. "We're all having seconds now, so there's plenty."

I grabbed a chair and a plate then took a bite and closed my eyes in pure bliss. *Heaven.*

IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU JOINED THE LIVING, Fang said as he came in through the doggie door with Princess.

Hey, someone has to work to keep us in pancakes and sausage, I shot back, ridiculously pleased to see the little mutt. I scratched his ears and asked out loud, "Have you eaten?"

"Don't let him tell you he hasn't," Gwen said with a laugh. "He and Princess pigged out already."

Princess sniffed. I AM NOT A PIG. I AM A PUREBRED CAVALIER KING CHARLES SPANIEL.

Shade stifled a laugh and leaned down to assure her she was a beautiful dog.

Feeling guilty, I said, “Gwen, how much do I owe you for all of this food? I can’t expect you to foot the cost for me and all of my friends . . . and cook for us, too.”

She waved it away. “Don’t worry about it. Your cousin Micah thought of that already. He sent over some money for groceries. Plus you *know* I love to cook. It’s fun to have so many appreciative mouths to feed.”

The mouths she spoke of were full of pancakes and sausage, so they all grunted, made yummy noises, and nodded to prove their appreciation.

Fang snorted. TALK ABOUT PIGS . . .

“See?” Gwen said with a laugh. “It also gives me a chance to make some of my favorite things.”

Well, if she was cool with it, who was I to bite the hand that fed me?

Fang groaned mentally.

Okay, okay. I’m not up to your standard of humor, Fang, but come on, admit it, you missed me.

ALWAYS, BABE, he assured me.

But there was something in his tone . . . something that sounded like guilt. He’d probably been too wrapped up in his new girlfriend to notice I was gone. I was happy for him, I really was, but couldn’t help but feel a little jealous at the loss of some of his affection.

NEVER, he asserted, licking my hand. YOU AND I ARE A TEAM. BESIDES, HOW COULD YOU FUNCTION WITHOUT ME?

I probably couldn’t. Smiling, I asked him, *Any leads on who took the books?*

NOPE. NOT A CLUE.

Has Shade asked Mood and Josh about that night?

NOT YET. THERE HASN’T BEEN A GOOD TIME TO BRING IT UP.

Okay, then I would. And it seemed like a good time to learn more about Andrew, since they all seemed to be such good friends. *Tell Shade to guard his expression.*

Shade jerked a little and looked at Fang, then nodded at me. Oh great. We’d have to work on that. Josh and Mood had been very careful to keep in contact with him at all times, so his naked emotions were on full display.

HE’S DOING BETTER, Fang said defensively as Shade froze his expression into a mask of fierce concentration and focused on his breakfast.

I knew that, and I hadn’t meant to be snarky. Fang accepted my apology but before I could ask them anything, my phone rang—Micah calling to return my text from last night.

I haven't been able to find Andrew," he said. "Are you sure he's the thief?"

"Pretty sure."

"I take it you can't talk now?"

"Not really." Not freely, anyway. I had to be careful what I said around his best buds.

"Okay, I'll keep looking. Call me when you can."

"Will do, I said and Micah hung up.

"That was Micah," I told everyone. "He's looking for Andrew. Do you know where the fire demon hangs out?"

Josh shrugged. "Rivercenter Mall, mostly. Why?"

No sense in lying. They'd find out the truth sooner or later anyway. "I ran into him last night," I said, trying to sound casual. "He tried to flash-fry a vampire. One of Alejandro's gang. An *innocent* vamp."

Mood looked surprised. "He did? Why?"

"I was hoping you could tell me why. He said something about a 'Veronica?'"

"Oh," Mood said. She and Josh suddenly looked sad. "She was his sister."

The operative word being *was*. A motive, maybe? "Killed by a vamp?" I asked, pretty confident I knew the answer.

"No," Mood said, surprising me. "She died of ovarian cancer. She was only twenty."

Geez, that shocked me.

"Cancer happens to people of all ages," Gwen said softly.

Fang added, SHADE ASKED ME TO TELL YOU THAT A FIRE DEMON'S NATURE MAKES CANCER WORSE, SPEEDS THE GROWTH OF THE CELLS. VERONICA WENT VERY FAST.

Everyone looked depressed. Dang, not my intention. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

Mood nodded. "Andrew has . . . anger issues. He was probably acting out of grief, needing someone to take out his rage on."

I hated to ask, when they were obviously so upset, but still, I needed to probe. "Maybe the *Encyclopedia Magicka* will be able to help demons like her in the future."

I cast a glance at Fang. *How are they reacting to my mention of the books?*

NO GUILT THERE. MOOD IS CONCENTRATING ON SOMETHING, AND JOSH IS WITHDRAWN AND QUIET—ZONED OUT.

Crap. Though Mood had been busy calming the crowd during the time the books had been stolen, I'd hoped Josh had noticed something odd with Andrew.

"Don't you know if the books will help?" Mood asked. "You read them, didn't you?"

"Not really," I said. "Stupidly, I didn't know how important they were. I didn't read much of them."

They were the only gifts my suicidal father had left to me, so I'd kept them. But the fear that I might turn out like him had made me reluctant to read much about our kind—only what I needed to survive.

Then, realizing Mood didn't know the books were missing, I added, "I figure they're better off in Micah's hands."

Mood smiled. "Yes, they're safe with him."

Fang snorted, and I shoved him with my foot in warning.

Shade touched my arm. "Can I speak to you privately?"

"Sure. Let's go to my room."

Mood smirked, and I felt strangely flustered. Should I explain? I couldn't tell them he probably just wanted to find out what I'd learned. Should I tell them I didn't think of Shade in that way?

BUT MAYBE YOU DO, Fang said, and I swear he smirked, too.

I glanced at Shade and saw his feelings for me written all over his face. *My* face heated, and I felt warm all over. Oh, crap.

JUST GO, OR YOU'LL MAKE IT WORSE, Fang said, sounding exasperated.

Grabbing Shade's hand, I pulled him toward my bedroom so we could talk. I heard everyone else laugh behind me and Mood sang softly, "Shade and Val sitting in a tree . . ."

"Oh, yeah. So grown up," I called back and was met with more laughter.

I pulled Shade into my bedroom and suddenly felt awkward. I'd never noticed before how big the bed was, how boring my room was, or how big Shade looked in it. Though I kept hold of his hand to ground him in this reality, I deliberately glanced down and to the side. "Uh, we need to work on your control of your facial expressions . . ."

"I have been," Shade said. "I've been practicing. That expression on my face just now? It says, 'I adore you, Val.' Fooled everyone, didn't it?"

Huh? I raised my head to look at him and saw amusement and fondness on his face. Oh. He'd been acting, to throw them off as to the real reason he'd asked to talk to me in private. Feeling my face heat even more, I said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that you're in love with me or anything. I was just . . ." Acting like a complete fool.

AND DOING AN EXCELLENT JOB OF IT, Fang agreed from the other room.

Grrr. *Go away for a little while, would you? I don't listen in on you and Princess.*

OKAY, OKAY, Fang said, sounding disappointed. I'LL TUNE OUT. JUST BE NICE TO THE GUY. HE'S MY FRIEND.

I will. He's my friend, too.

"It's okay," Shade assured me, sinking down onto the bed. "I think I am a little bit in love with you."

Oh, wow. No one had ever said that to me before. Tears stung my eyelids, and emotion clogged my throat. I plopped down on the bed next to him, still holding his hand. "I-I—" I didn't know what to say.

"I didn't mean to weird you out or anything, but I thought you should know." When I didn't say anything, he added softly, "You don't have to say it back."

Hell, the way I was feeling now, emotions all mixed up and kind of sappy, maybe I *did* feel the same way. "Are you sure it's not just Lola?"

He shook his head. "You and Lola are a package deal. How could someone love only part of you?"

My family had no problem with separating the two of us . . . and Lola was definitely *persona non grata* there. "Good question," I muttered.

"Poor Val . . ." Shade put his arms around me and hugged me to him.

Oh, wow. This was so great. He smelled really good, and his warm arms made me feel protected and safe.

Lola stirred, wanting more of Shade . . . a lot more. I snapped her back, desperately trying to remember how the candle flame had helped me find an inner space where I could be free of her. I started to pull away, but Shade stopped me.

"It's okay," he whispered. "Remember, Micah said to use me to help keep Lola under control. It's better if you do it now and don't wait until she's so hungry that you have no control." He laid down on my bed and pulled me down beside him, looking all sexy, longing, and hopeful. "Let go, Val."

Lola wanted him bad, and I had to admit the rest of me did, too. But it was hard to let loose when I was a whole lot more used to holding back. I laid in the circle of his arms like a stiff pole.

Oops, bad choice of words. Desperately, I said, "I thought you wanted to ask me what Fang found out about your friends."

He kissed me on the forehead. "I'm guessing he cleared Mood and Josh, but you're not so sure about Andrew." He followed up with a snuggle and kiss just below my ear.

Lust and longing shot through me, but still I managed to keep a lid on Lola. "If you knew that, why did you want to speak to me?"

He chuckled into my neck. "For this. You need to satisfy Lola, and I'm here to let you."

Oh. He continued to place soft kisses in strategic places, and I felt myself melt in his arms, feeling all gooey and warm, yet dizzy with emotion. He was right. What would it hurt? “But you’re injured,” I protested half-heartedly.

He kissed my lips softly. “We aren’t going to do anything but kiss,” he promised me. “I know you won’t take too much energy. I trust you.”

I could see in his eyes that he meant exactly what he said. His faith both humbled and seduced me. Convinced he really meant it, I relaxed and kissed him back, letting Lola emerge, slow and easy. I felt my energy flow into him everywhere we touched body to body, smooth and thick as sweet syrup. He gasped and his whole body quivered with desire. For me.

Our kiss broken, I held on to him as if he were my lifeline and let the energy ebb and flow through us, enjoying the waves of sensation as much as Lola did, as we explored his nerve-endings psychically, stroking and pleasuring here . . . there . . . everywhere. His desire fed back to me, filling the empty wells of my demon self, making me strong and whole. I felt fully in control, confident and assured . . . and very, *very* turned on.

But Shade had asked for only this, no more, so I resisted the urge to strip off our clothes and offer up my virginity. Though I wanted very much to lose it right then, I was also too conscious of the people in the kitchen just down the hallway, wondering exactly what we were doing in here.

But when Shade grasped my butt in both hands and clutched me to him, I lost it. Pure lust shot through me, directly into him, where we were pressed together at the hips. I arched into him and Shade stiffened, then gasped and shuddered, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my backside.

He relaxed, then lay still, leaving me feeling like I still wanted something, but wasn’t quite sure what it was. Lola knew, though, and drank up all that lovely energy he offered us. Well, not all. I had enough control to take only what I needed, not so much that it would leave him totally depleted.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered into my neck. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “That’s what’s supposed to happen, I think.”

“But you—you’re not satisfied.”

“Sure I am. I let Lola drink her fill.”

He raised up to search my face. “That’s not what I meant—”

I cut him off. “It’s enough.” Especially the way he looked at me, all sleepy, satisfied, and worshipful. That was Lola’s doing. Feeding on him with his consent was one thing. Letting him confuse his reaction to Lola with falling in love with me was quite another. I couldn’t trust the way he felt and couldn’t let myself get the two confused either.

I smoothed his hair back from his brow where his bruise still lingered. “How’s your head doing?”

“It’s fine,” he said impatiently. “Val—”

My bedroom door burst open then and we both jumped. Crap—I should have locked it. Dan stood there, but his face wasn't as easy to read as Shade's. All I could see was he'd shut down.

Fang barreled in after him. SORRY, VAL, WE COULDN'T TELL HE WAS GOING TO DO THIS.

Don't worry about it.

Gwen, Mood, and Josh peered in behind him, and I tried to untangle myself from Shade with as much dignity as I could. Thank heavens we were both still clothed. Before anyone could say anything, I went on the offensive. "What do you want?" I asked Dan.

"I came over to see my sister, and I find her place filled with . . ." He fought for words and finally said, ". . . your *friends*." He gestured, looking disgusted at finding Shade in my bed in all his swirly glory.

Well, I was beyond feeling embarrassed and heading straight for totally pissed. "Demons, you mean. Gwen knows what they are."

"She *what*? She shouldn't know a damned thing about them."

"Why not?" I challenged. "You told her about vampires and me—without my knowledge or consent, by the way."

"That's different. She lives with you—she had a right to know."

"Yes, she did, just as she has the right to know my friends are demons as well. Are you saying I can't have my friends over to my own place?"

Dan gaped at me, not knowing what to say.

Gwen touched his arm. "She's right, Dan. And she brought them only because Shade really needed my help. He was injured."

"Just like Nicole," I added. "But he couldn't go to the hospital the way she could, so I had to get some help for him."

"But why my sister?"

"Because last time I looked she had way more medical training than anyone else I know. And she's a kind and generous person." *Unlike someone else I could name.* "And though Shade can heal others, he can't heal himself. Remember that, Dan?" I pressed. "Maybe you should take a moment to recall how this demon healed you when you really needed it."

Dan relaxed a little and ran a hand over his face. "You're right. Shade deserves treatment just as much as anyone else. And I understand why you brought him here, to Gwen. I'd probably do the same thing in your shoes."

Whoa. That was quite a concession. I glanced at Mood to see if she was controlling him, but she shook her head. I guess Dan could be reasonable.

"But that doesn't mean I like it," he added.

“You don’t have to,” Gwen said, looking mulish. “I’m a big girl now and I can make decisions for myself. You don’t have to play the protective big brother all the time, you know.”

Dan spread his hands helplessly. “I can’t help it. It’s what I do.”

Gwen laughed. “I know.”

I did, too. It was what had made me fall for him in the first place—his hero complex. Unfortunately, it was also what made him so frustrating to deal with sometimes. Especially when it came to women. Speaking of that . . . “How’s Nicole?”

He sighed. “She’s very lucky she wasn’t hurt worse. She’s out of danger now.” He glanced at Shade. “She said you tried to protect her, to push her out of the way. You probably saved her life.”

Shade shrugged, his expression inscrutably swirly now that no one was touching him. “You would have done the same.”

All too true.

Dan shrugged. “Thanks just the same.”

Gwen patted Dan’s shoulder. “You’re tired and not thinking straight. Why don’t you go home and get some sleep? We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Okay, good idea.” Dan glanced around him once more at all the demons in Gwen’s townhouse—and in my bedroom, specifically. He started to say something, then shook his head and left.

The tension dissipated. Mood grasped Shade’s hand and led him and Josh back into the kitchen.

I glanced at Gwen to see how she was taking the whole scene.

She looked concerned . . . for me. “I’ll talk to Dan later, let him know he was being a jerk.” She cocked her head. “This attitude of his isn’t really directed at you, you know. He gets all big brotherly overprotective when he thinks I’m in danger.”

Or when Nicole has been hurt, apparently. I nodded, not really caring at the moment. I didn’t want to think or worry about any of this anymore. Remembering something Gwen had said before, I asked, “Didn’t you mention something yesterday about going shopping with me?”

She perked up. “I did. And I have the day off. Want to go?”

“Sure. But I need to shower and change first.”

SHOPPING? Fang said incredulously. WE HAVE A THIEF TO CATCH AND YOU’RE GOING SHOPPING?

Yep. I guess you missed the part where Josh said Andrew hangs out at the Rivercenter Mall?

OH, Fang said, sounding impressed. WELL, AREN’T YOU THE CLEVER GIRL?

Try Me

Why, yes, I thought at him, not bothering to hide my smugness. I was riding the crest of Shade's appreciation for me, even if Lola was part of it. And don't you forget it, either.

Try Me

Chapter Eleven



Gwen offered to drive, and as I got in her car, she said, “I’m guessing you want to go to the Rivercenter Mall?”

Busted. I shot her a guilty look. “I forget how smart you are.”

She laughed. “No, I’m not, but I do know how Dan thinks when he’s working a case. I figure you aren’t too much different.” She pulled out of the parking spot. “But you have to promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“If you can’t find Andrew, you’ll still spend time really shopping.”

“Okay. That actually sounds fun.”

It didn’t take too long to get to Rivercenter. Located downtown on the River Walk, the four-story, glass-walled mall was nestled between a couple of high-end hotels, including the historic Menger. The glass could have made it look cold and modern, but it didn’t. That’s because one arm of the San Antonio River dead-ended inside the mall. Surrounded by the food court, with plants and brightly colored umbrellas outside, the area looked comfy and inviting.

If Andrew was hanging out somewhere in the mall, it was probably there, the most popular social spot. We cruised the area but didn’t see the redheaded fire demon. I did, however, spot someone who looked familiar—the green-haired girl I’d met at Micah’s party. She was chatting with some friends, so I steered Gwen in that direction.

I walked by and pretended I’d just recognized her. “Oh, hi. Shawndra, right? I’m Val. We met at Micah’s party.”

She smiled and nodded, but cast nervous glances at her companions—they must be fully human and not aware that Shawndra wasn’t. I wasn’t in a mood to be too sympathetic. “Say, Shawndra, have you seen Andrew? I heard he hangs out here.”

She shook her head. “Haven’t seen him in days.”

“Do you know where he might be?”

“No. He’s been kind of weird ever since his sister died. Can’t blame him, y’know?”

I nodded. “Well, Micah’s looking for him, so if you see Andrew or know where he might be, let Micah know.”

“Okay,” she said, but wouldn’t meet my eyes.

She knew something, but I couldn’t press the issue here and now.

“Thanks.” Gwen and I had only gone a few feet when Shawndra caught up to us.

She leaned in close and lowered her voice. “Tell Micah that Veronica and her boyfriend got kinda cozy with the vamps toward the end. Andrew wasn’t very happy about it.”

That made sense. “Thanks. Do you know—”

“Sorry, gotta go,” she said and scooted off before I could question her more.

I started to follow her, but Gwen stopped me with a hand on my arm. “Not a good time,” she murmured.

Yeah, I knew that. But it was frustrating to get information in little bits and pieces like this. What did this mean? Was it even important?

Gwen put an arm around my waist. “Okay, Val. Job over. Time to have fun. You promised.”

I thought about protesting, but she was right—I had promised. “Okay.” Besides, the next obvious step was to talk to Alejandro again, and he wouldn’t be available until the sun went down. I did text Micah, though, to let him know what little I’d learned. I grinned at Gwen. “Let’s go shopping.”

“Great. First stop, Macy’s.” As we headed upstairs, Gwen said, “Let’s not worry about what styles are called and just figure out what you like. First, what kind of feeling do you want in your bedroom?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, what do you want to feel when you’re in there? Warm and comfortable? Cool and relaxed? Or hot and sexy?”

“Definitely *not* hot and sexy.” Lola didn’t need any encouragement.

“Okay, then how *do* you want to feel when you’re at home alone in your room? Think about it for a few minutes.”

I didn’t realize choosing a style and colors would be so complicated. “I don’t know . . . I guess I want . . . a sanctuary. Somewhere quiet and relaxing where I can go and just chill.”

“Okay, what do you find calm and relaxing? What kind of place?”

That was easy. “The River Walk.” It’s where I went to unwind.

“Good.” She beamed at me. “Now we’re getting somewhere.” She pulled me toward the bedding department and helped me figure out what I liked and didn’t like. Nothing seemed quite right, though, until Gwen said, “I think I found something you might like. It’s on sale, too.” She pulled out a duvet cover in a beautiful shade of silvery grayish blue with a cracked pattern of a lighter ice blue. Very soothing. I loved it and could definitely imagine myself relaxing under its palette of watery colors.

We paired it with chocolate brown and soon had pillows, curtains, and a rug that matched. I couldn’t wait to get home and put it all together. “A chic, sophisticated look,” Gwen called it.

Me, sophisticated? Who knew?

I checked out and gulped at the final total. But I hadn’t spent much of my salary since Ramirez had hired me for the San Antonio P.D., so my checking account could handle it. Gwen and I loaded up with the bags of my purchases and, feeling like a pack mule, I said, “Thanks for your help with this. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Once we get your bedroom decorated, we’ll work on your clothes.”

I didn’t trust that gleam in her eye. I glanced down at my jeans and sweatshirt. “What’s wrong—”

“Val!” someone yelled.

I glanced around and saw my perky, blond, half-sister hurrying toward me, beaming. “Val, you’re *shopping*,” Jennifer said, as if it were an earth-shattering event.

As she almost strangled me with a hug, and her ponytail whacked me in the face, I said, “Yeah, Gwen talked me into it.”

Behind Jen, I heard an exasperated, “Jennifer, I told you not to run through the mall like that.” It was Mom, and she came to an abrupt halt when she saw me. Surprise and chagrin crossed her face, then she came forward more slowly. “Hello, Val.” There was a lot less tension in her face than I was accustomed to. Had kicking me out made her happier?

“Hi, Mom.” My pleasure in seeing my sister—back to normal after the recent events, in which Lily had held her hostage at Alejandro’s house—dimmed. Gwen nudged me. Oh yeah, introductions. “This is my roommate, Gwen, Dan’s sister. Gwen, this is my little sister, Jen, and my mom, Sharon.”

They all made polite noises and Jen said brightly, “What are you shopping for? Christmas? Are all those bags yours?”

“All just for me,” I said, feeling selfish. Mom and Jen always shopped early for the holidays, but I was the last-minute type. “Gwen was helping pick out some things to decorate my room. It’s kind of boring and blah.”

“Cool,” Jen said. She peered inside the largest bag. “Oh, sweet. Aren’t these colors sweet, Mom?”

Jen was trying a little too hard, but I appreciated the effort.

Mom dutifully looked in the bag. “Yes, very nice,” she said. But what I heard in her tone was, *I’m only being polite to please my real daughter.*

Strange how Mom could make me feel like a kid, and unwanted, again, all with a few simple words. Wait—she could only make me feel that way if I let her. And I was determined not to let her. I had a place of my own now . . . a job, friends. I didn't need her anymore.

"We were just going to go to lunch," Jen said brightly. "Why don't you join us?"

Crap. Eating lunch with a churning stomach didn't sound like fun. I glanced at Mom.

She smiled politely and said, "Yes, why don't you?"

Well, at least she was trying to be pleasant. Guess if she was making the effort, I could, too. Otherwise, I wouldn't get to see Jen or Rick much. I glanced at Gwen. She knew my history, and though she looked sympathetic, she was obviously leaving the choice up to me.

"Okay," I said. "Where do you want to go?"

We decided to eat at Chili's, and headed in that direction. Jen, thinking she was being subtle, drew Gwen slightly ahead, babbling away and asking her questions.

"How have you been?" Mom asked in a carefully neutral tone.

Just as cautiously, I said, "Fine. I have a great job, great friends."

"I knew you'd land on your feet."

She did? She really thought I'd be okay? Well, that was a small consolation for her kicking me out of the house. Very small. "Uh, how about you and Rick?"

"Fine. We're doing fine."

Sheesh, could this be any more awkward? "And Jen? Is she doing better now?" No longer trying to be like me, no longer scaring the heck out of her parents by consorting with vampires?

"Yes. And you?" Mom asked tightly. "Are you learning to control your . . . self better?"

What had happened to make her sound all pissed off again? Her gaze darted toward a group of guys up ahead. They were watching us, laughing too loud, and strutting.

Oh. Mom thought my inner demon had caused this masculine showmanship. But after feeding on Shade this morning, Lola had no interest in a bunch of young idiots. At first I was a bit ticked that Mom automatically assumed I was to blame, then realized she had no reason to believe differently. Sighing, I said, "Stop here a minute."

"Why?" But she did as I asked. Gwen and Jen kept on going.

The heads of the ratty pack swiveled away from me. They ogled Gwen and Jen instead.

"See, I'm not the only one who can generate lust." Gwen and Jen could do that all on their own, no succubus required.

Mom nodded. "I see." As we started walking again, she added softly, "I'm sorry for making an assumption."

Whoa. Mom, apologizing? *That* was a first. Maybe we could actually have a civil conversation? I nodded to accept her apology, and we proceeded in silence to Chili's.

Once we got there, Jen did most of the talking over lunch, asking me about my decorating, grilling Gwen about her job, and raving about some Christmas dance she had coming up next month and the dress she'd bought for it. Everyone was very polite and careful not to mention anything remotely weird. All very normal.

Stepford Wife normal, anyway. It may have looked ordinary from the outside, but inside, it felt rather surreal, like I was caught in one of those old Nick At Night *Brady Bunch* reruns. Only Marsha never had to stake a vampire or battle her inner succubus. As I pushed my half-eaten burger and fries around the plate, I wondered if maybe Mom and Jen thought that if they didn't mention my world, it would cease to exist. *Good luck with that.*

A worse thought occurred to me. Maybe they were avoiding the topic because they were ashamed of me, of my job with the SCU. After all, it had almost gotten Jen killed.

Nope, wrong. Jen had almost gotten *herself* killed by being stupid enough to hang around vampires when she wasn't equipped to deal with them. But Mom probably blamed me. I felt an urge to poke at the sore spot to see what would happen. Sure, it might open the wound wider, but I needed to know how they really felt.

When we were all finished eating, Gwen excused herself to use the restroom. Once she was gone, I blurted out, "Gwen knows what I am."

Silence fell, and Mom looked uncomfortable.

"We figured," Jen said.

Okay, so that wasn't why they were avoiding the topic. "Any ill effects from Lily's control of you?" I asked Jen.

Mom winced but Jennifer shook her head, her blond ponytail bouncing. "Not a one. Of course, I'm smart enough not to do *that* again."

Yeah, avoiding vampires was probably best all around. For people like her, anyway . . . normal people. "I hope so," I said, grinning. Jen was still her old self and didn't seem to have changed around me at all. Maybe she was being discreet, for Mom's sake.

"So, what are you doing with your free time these days?" I asked Jen. In other words, how much of a leash did Mom and Rick keep on her?

Jen shrugged. "Oh, you know. Just school stuff and working at the store."

A pretty tight leash, then. "Is Rick running the store all alone today?" They usually liked to have two people there.

"No." Jen grimaced. "The dark and broody one is there with him."

I raised my eyebrows. "Who?"

“You know,” she said. “A de—” She broke off and cast a guilty glance around the restaurant. “I mean, someone like you.”

Oh, that’s right. Rick had mentioned that Mom had relented enough to let him hire a part-demon, in thanks for what Micah’s people had done to help free Jen and Rick from Lily. “I assume he has a name?” I asked.

“Joshua,” Mom said. “Do you know him?”

Hmm, not what I’d expected. Sounded to me like Andrew. “I know a Josh, but I don’t think of him as all that broody.” Introspective, maybe. Quiet. If it was the same guy, Jen and I must see people differently.

“Sheesh,” Jen said. “All he does is mope around, and when he doesn’t act like the end of the world is coming any moment, he looks angry at everyone.”

“He’s polite to the customers,” Mom said, defending him.

Jen rolled her eyes. I gathered he wasn’t all that friendly to *her*. Maybe her vanity was hurt. Or not. My little sister wasn’t exactly the self-absorbed type. “Might be a different Josh,” I said. It wasn’t an uncommon name.

“Probably,” Jen said wryly. “If you knew this one, you’d probably throw him to the vamps the first time he opened his mouth.”

“Jennifer,” Mom said, low and tight as she glanced around the restaurant. “Don’t say that word.”

What word? Oh . . . vamps.

Jen cast her eyes down. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

Gwen came back then and sat down, looking surprised at the tension at the table.

“It’s okay,” I told my little sister. “After all, they’re coming out of the closet, so many people know about them.”

Mom compressed her lips together but didn’t say anything. Perversely wanting her to say what she was really thinking, I deliberately brought up the subject everyone at the table had been avoiding. “I’m doing much better at controlling my inner demon, Mom. Micah is helping me.” So was Shade, of course, but I decided not to explain exactly *how* he was helping me.

My mother opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something, then glanced at Gwen and shut it again. Ah, it must be the stranger’s presence that was causing her to be so polite. Persisting, I said, “But I do have a question. Did Rick ask you about my father’s background?”

“No. What about him?” she asked, squirming. Obviously, it wasn’t something Mom liked to talk about.

“Do you know if he has some other kind of demon in his gene pool?”

Startled, she asked, “Like what?”

“I don’t know. Something strong, that heals quickly and is super fast.” *Something like me.*

“No. Aren’t those skills . . . part of what you are?”

“Not so far as Micah knows. Did my father have these abilities?” She ought to know—she’d lived with him for a year or so, before the divorce.

Mom frowned, thinking. “Not that I recall.”

“Then where did I get them?” I asked softly. A sudden thought occurred to me. “Do you have any demons in your side of the family, maybe way back, like a great-great grandfather or something?” Maybe it was dormant in her and Jen and came out in me because of Lola.

Mom looked appalled. “Of course not. There’s nothing like *that* in my family at all.”

Ouch. “Nothing except me,” I reminded her. “Or did you forget I’m part of your family, too?”

“Mom didn’t mean it that way,” Jen protested.

For some reason, it ticked me off that she defended Mom. Gwen looked decidedly uncomfortable. I felt a little bad about that, but heck, she was part of a family. She knew what family baggage was like. I let loose. “The hell she didn’t.”

“I didn’t,” Mom confirmed. “I didn’t mean to—”

“You never mean to,” I snapped back. “Yet you always manage to treat me like I’m a total stranger, a freak, not a real member of the family.” Why the heck were my eyes suddenly stinging, anyway?

Mom covered my hand with hers. “Val, I’m sorry. There’s some truth in what you say.”

“I know,” I muttered as I pulled back my hand and wiped at my eyes.

“But you have to understand I’ve managed your . . . situation . . . in a way I thought was best for everyone.”

I closed my eyes, blocking out the view of everyone’s expressions—Mom’s earnest, Jen’s anxious, and Gwen’s compassionate. I sought for that calm quiet place deep inside me, but it was elusive today, too obscured by the emotions roiling inside me.

One side of me said, “Mom’s really trying.” But the other side retorted, “Yeah, but it’s easy for her, now that she’s gotten me out of her house.”

The question was, what did *I* want? : That was easy—I wanted to do my job; meaning find the person who’d stolen the *Encyclopedia Magicka* and, apparently, was using its spells to turn San Antonio’s most peaceful vampires into raving killers; find out what other kind of demon was inside me; and be at peace with my family, and myself.

I was still working on the first one, and nowhere near accomplishing the second. However, I realized my question about Mom’s side of the family was off-base. If Mom and Jen had been part-demon, Fang would have been able to read their minds. So that wasn’t the answer.

As for the third, I guessed if Mom could try to mend our relationship, so could I.

“Are you okay, Val?” Jen asked tentatively.

No. I was frustrated and a bit confused. But I opened my eyes. “Just peachy. Let’s change the subject.”

“You’re still going to come for Thanksgiving, aren’t you?” she pressed.

Mom’s expression was neutral once more, so I couldn’t tell how she felt. Did I really want to go, knowing it wouldn’t be anything but tense, knowing I’d feel like an outsider in my former home? “I’m not sure,” I hedged.

“Please come,” Mom said. “It’ll be like old times. When you were a kid. We’ll eat too much, Rick will watch football, and we’ll play games until we fall asleep.”

It sounded good, but I doubted it could ever be that way again. “Can I bring Fang?” If I was going to endure this Thanksgiving, I at least wanted to have my best friend there.

“Sure,” Jen said brightly. “I’ll lock the cat up in my room while he’s there.”

“Okay, then, I’ll come.”

“Great,” Mom said. “Bring anyone you like. In fact, why don’t you invite Dan?”

I looked toward Gwen for help, but she slid her gaze back to me, tossing the conversational ball into my court.

I sighed. “Dan’s just my partner at work, Mom, nothing else. And we’re not even *that*, anymore.”

“Oh.” Mom looked surprised. “I thought you and he . . .” She trailed off, apparently unsure how to finish that sentence.

I couldn’t let her think I’d been dumped and was all hurt and everything. “No, I’m kinda seeing someone else.” Though “seeing” might be the wrong word when referring to Shade. I cast a glance at Gwen, silently hoping she’d back me on this.

“Really?” Jen asked eagerly. “Who?”

“His name’s Shade. You haven’t met him.”

Mom smiled politely. “Then please bring him.”

Sheesh, if they thought I was freaky, how would they react to Shade? “I don’t know, Mom. He’s a member of the Underground, too.”

“I assumed that.”

Jen bounced a little in her chair. “Promise you’ll invite him, Val. I want to meet him.”

Gwen nodded, like she was actually encouraging this madness.

Ooookay. It looked like I was the only one who saw the potential for a disastrous Shapiro family holiday. I took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll ask.” After all, attending Thanksgiving dinner with my family and Shade had to be easier than

Try Me

our most recent family get-together, where I'd infiltrated a vampire's lair and beheaded a rogue bloodsucker to save the life of everyone I loved, right? Right?

Try Me

Chapter Twelve



After lunch, Gwen and I gathered up all my shopping bags and said our goodbyes. Once Mom and Jen were out of sight, I muttered, “Good grief, can you really imagine Shade at the same table as my mother? She’ll freak.”

Gwen smiled. “I don’t think you give her enough credit. She’s trying.”

Maybe. “But Shade and I aren’t really dating.” I’d made that up to keep from sounding like a loser.

“You will be soon,” Gwen said with a grin. “Besides, with Shade and Fang both there, two friends will have your back.”

“Good point.” And if I put it that way to Shade, I wouldn’t have to deal with the whole they-think-you’re-my-boyfriend thing, either. “I’ll play it by ear.”

Gwen and I wandered the mall again then swung back through the food court, but still didn’t see Andrew. His suspicious behavior made me think more and more that he *was* the thief. If he was using the magick to poison vampires, I had to find him before he got more innocent bystanders killed. I kept thinking of Brittany.

When we got home, we found a whole pack of demons waiting for us—Mood and Josh, plus Micah and three demons I didn’t know. Josh looked as calm as always. But . . . why did it take so many people to stay with Shade? One would do it.

MICAH CAME TO SEE YOU, Fang said. THE REST ARE HOPING FOR LUNCH—I CAN HEAR THEIR STOMACHS GRUMBING. BUNCHA MOOCHES.

Princess looked indignant. I AM NOT A MOOCH.

OF COURSE NOT, SWEET THING, Fang assured her. I WAS TALKING ABOUT THE HUMAN DEMONS, NOT US CANINES.

I grinned at Gwen. “I think your reputation as a cook has preceded you. But you don’t have to feed this hungry crowd, you know.”

They all protested and Gwen laughed, dropping the rest of my shopping bags at the front door. “No problem. I can whip something up in a hurry.”

Micah shook his head ruefully. “Now I understand why everyone was so eager to see Shade. Looks like I’ll have to give you more money for groceries.” He smiled. “And I guess I’ll need to taste your cooking, too.”

Demons tended to crave the sensual pleasures, including good food. No surprise.

“You shouldn’t have to pay for everything,” I protested. “Let them earn it. I’ll put them to work.”

The group seemed willing to help, so I asked them to decorate my bedroom, under Mood’s direction, while Gwen cooked. Though Princess insisted she wasn’t a *mooch*, she chose to stay in the kitchen, sneaking scraps.

I drew Micah and Shade into the living room, and Fang followed. Now that no one was touching him, Shade turned all swirly again. I felt a little shy about touching him after what had happened earlier in the bedroom, but people had been touching him all day, to keep him grounded. He wouldn’t think I was coming on to him or anything, would he? But how would Lola react? Would she try to suck more out of him than he was willing to give?

Fang practically rolled his eyes. JUST DO IT ALREADY.

Feeling my cheeks warm, I tentatively laid my hand on top of Shade’s. Lola was a little interested, but she was still sated, so she didn’t try to attack him or anything. Relieved, I asked, “How are you doing? Feeling better?”

“Yes, much better. But . . . it’s probably a good idea for you to keep touching me. Just in case.”

I looked away. “Uh, are you still blitzing in and out?”

“I don’t know. People won’t stop touching me long enough to find out.”

“Well, let’s try it.” I took my hand away and we watched him for a few moments. So far, so good.

Micah glanced at me. “Even if he *is* better, we need to keep using him as an excuse to invite demons here to help take care of him, until we’ve questioned everyone. Your roommate’s reputation as a chef will help that along. Our kind can’t resist great food.”

I chuckled. “If your wallet can take it.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m more concerned about finding the *Encyclopedia Magicka*.”

Lowering my voice, I said, “I didn’t have any luck tracking Andrew today. How about you?”

Micah shook his head. “Not yet. But I haven’t stopped looking, and I’ve put the word out. *Someone* has to know where he is.”

Shade's features flickered in and out once again. But it wasn't as strong as before, and he had lasted longer this time—progress. "Still not totally there," I said, and laid my hand on his again.

Shade smiled wanly. "Yeah. It kind of feels like motion sickness. I think I'll lie down for awhile here on the couch."

"Good," Micah said. "And we'll continue to keep someone with you over the next few days while we question everyone. Though I still think the thief has to be one of Alejandro's people."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I tested everyone who was there that night, and none of them took the books."

"Everyone Alejandro *said* was there," Micah corrected. "How do you know he wasn't lying?"

I didn't, really. Had I missed something? Should I have read Alejandro's mind, too?

Fang nudged me. I'M SURE YOU DID EVERYTHING YOU COULD. BUT MICAH DOESN'T WANT IT TO BE ONE OF HIS PEOPLE.

Yeah, I know. And Alejandro had offered to let me read his mind. Why would he do that if he had anything to hide?

"We need to keep testing *everyone*," I emphasized. "Maybe someone helped Andrew, or knows where he hid the books." I glanced at Fang. "Have you read these three new demons?"

YEP. VERDICT, *NOT GUILTY*.

I figured, but had to ask. I glanced at Micah. "When I was reading the vamps, I did learn something."

"What?"

"They think one of your people, maybe the whole Demon Underground, is responsible for the vamps going mad."

Micah looked bewildered. "Why?"

"Because of everyone's reaction at the social. They think you're trying to make the New Blood Movement unstable so you can prevent them from coming out on a national level. To keep the demons hidden and underground."

"That's ridiculous. We don't operate like that."

"Maybe *you* don't, but can you say that for all of your people?" I asked. "After all, Andrew did try to roast himself a bloodsucker."

Micah sighed and shook his head. "All it takes is one stupid kid to mess things up. We really need to find Andrew, make him apologize. The last thing I want is a war with the vampires."

"Well, if one of the demons did steal the books to learn their weaknesses and make them go crazy, avoiding a smackdown might be kind of difficult."

Fang snorted. KIND OF.

Micah gazed thoughtfully at me. "How do you think we can smooth this over with Alejandro?"

Startled, I asked, "Why are you asking me?"

"Because you know him better than anyone. And he respects you."

Sheesh. How'd I go from vampire slayer to vampire *buddy*?

BY BEING FAIR, Fang said. BY NOT GOING OFF HALF-COCKED AND SEEING EVERYTHING IN BLACK AND WHITE. BY NOT BEING ANDREW.

"Okay, okay. Let me think." If I were Alejandro, what would I want? "Maybe if you convince the underground to come out with them. Or find out what's causing the vamps to go crazy and find a way to stop it."

Fang spoke up. OR GIVE THEM ANDREW'S HEAD ON A PLATTER.

A little extreme, maybe. But it worked for me.

Micah frowned. "I can try to meet with them again, and ask everyone to keep an open mind, but I'm not sure that's something I want to do. As for helping them to find out what's causing their problem, how could I do that?"

FIND THE BOOKS, Fang suggested.

Micah glared at him. "That's assuming one of my people has stolen them and is using them to injure Alejandro's people."

WELL, IT KIND OF LOOKS THAT WAY, DOESN'T IT? Fang retorted. AND IF YOU WEREN'T BEING SUCH AN OSTRICH, YOU'D GET YOUR HEAD OUT OF THE SAND AND SEE IT, TOO.

I grinned to myself, glad to see I wasn't the only one to catch the sharp side of Fang's tongue.

"All right," Micah said. "I'll keep an open mind. Let's say that's true. Let's say one of my people is trying to injure the vamps. What could he or she be doing? And how?"

"Blood," Shade said from where he was lying on the couch.

We looked down at him in surprise. I'd almost forgotten he was there.

"It's in the blood somehow," he explained.

I nodded. "Probably. But shouldn't we figure out what's in it first, then how they got it in there?"

Micah nodded. "But what could it be?"

I shrugged. "Well, the only way I know to hurt them but not kill them is with holy water or silver."

"That could be it," Micah said. "Maybe someone injected holy water or silver nitrate into the blood . . . and the pain made them crazy."

"That's possible," I conceded. "You might be able to test for silver nitrate, but how about holy water?"

“The volume of water in the blood sample might show that. We’ll figure something out.” Sounding more excited now, Micah asked, “Do you think you could get some of the blood from the banks where the two incidents occurred? We have a lab technician who can test the samples for us.”

“I’ll try.” But I wasn’t sure how Alejandro would take such a request. He might be a bit touchy after everything that had happened.

“Good.”

The demons trooped back in then and insisted I come look at my bedroom. Cool. Since I didn’t have to put it together, I’d have the surprise of seeing my bedroom completely done.

They all followed me to the bedroom and when I stepped in, my mouth dropped open. It didn’t look like the same room at all. The icy blue and chocolate brown looked fabulous together. Very soothing and inviting. “Wow. You even moved the furniture.”

“Yes,” Mood said, beaming. “Don’t you think it makes the room look bigger?”

“Yeah, it does. You’re a genius.” I looked at Fang. “What do you think?”

WHAT DO I LOOK LIKE, A DECORATOR? But he added, I’M COLOR BLIND. PARTIALLY, ANYWAY.

“You have to live here, too,” I reminded him. “So I want to know what you think.”

He jumped up on the bed, pawed at the spread, then turned around three times before he laid down. SOFT. I LIKE.

“He approves,” I said, laughing.

“Great,” Mood said, and I’d never seen the Emo girl look so . . . un-Emo. “Now all you need is a few accessories in brown and blue, maybe a little silver. And what do you think about putting a headboard on the bed, maybe painting the walls a nice shade of—”

“Whoa, whoa,” I said, putting out my hands to stop the words gushing from her mouth. “Give me some time to get used to this, first. I’m not sure my bank account can afford too much more this month.”

Mood stuck her hands in her pockets and hunched her shoulders up to her ears in an apologetic shrug. “Sorry. I guess I got carried away.”

“Oh, no,” I assured her. “I want to hear your ideas.”

Micah looked bemused. “I had no idea you were knowledgeable about decorating, Mood.”

She shrugged. “I watch HGTV.”

“Me, too,” Gwen said from somewhere behind her. “Don’t you love all their ideas?” As Mood enthusiastically agreed, Gwen poked her head in further. “Wow, the room does look great. And I agree with everything Mood said.”

I laughed. “Well, good. You two can be my own personal decorators.”

“You’ve got a deal,” Mood said.

Gwen nodded. “But right now, I’m everyone else’s personal chef. You guys hungry?”

They all were, of course, so Gwen fed them quesadillas with homemade salsa and guacamole, even fixing plates for Fang and Princess. I hadn’t eaten much of my lunch, so I ate, too. Over the food, I casually brought up the subject of Andrew’s whereabouts.

Mood glanced at Micah apprehensively. “Why are you looking for him?”

“Nothing bad,” the Demon Underground leader assured them. “I just want to help him get his demon under control so he doesn’t hurt anyone. You heard about the incident at the blood bank?”

They all exchanged glances and nodded.

“Well, he was obviously out of control. I want to help him find it again so he doesn’t hurt himself or anyone else.”

Gwen looked apprehensive. “How do you control a fire demon?”

Good question.

“With another demon,” Micah explained. “We can usually find a way to contain someone who has gone rogue, without hurting them.”

“And if you can’t?” Gwen persisted. “What happens then? I see enough people in the ER as it is.”

“Then he becomes just like a bad vampire,” Shade said softly. “He’s a menace to society, and to us.”

“You mean you’d turn him over to the SCU?” Gwen asked.

“If we have to,” Micah said. He glanced at me. “I doubt it’ll come to that.”

YEAH, Fang agreed. MICAH WILL PROBABLY USE YOU AS HIS OWN PRIVATE ENFORCER.

Made sense. And I had absolutely no problem with that.

The others looked appalled.

“Think about it,” Micah urged. “If someone is that blatantly using their powers, harming normals, what would that do to us?”

“It would put us in danger, too,” Shade said. “Jeopardize everything the Underground has been working toward.”

HOO, BOY, Fang chimed in, obviously talking to all the demons at the table. TALK ABOUT A WITCH HUNT.

The others nodded slowly. Mood spoke up. “Well, I don’t think Andrew is out of control, but I also don’t know where he is. We’ve been looking for him, too.”

Another guy put in, “Yeah. We’ve looked everywhere he normally hangs out.”

The doorbell rang and Mood glanced at her watch. "It's not the next shift. They're not due for another hour."

I laughed. "Maybe they came early to check out Gwen's cooking. I'll get it."

But when I opened the door, my mouth dropped open. Andrew. All by himself, looking surly and defensive.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"Of course." But now I was totally confused.

Fang snorted. YOU AIN'T THE ONLY ONE, BABE.

He followed me into the kitchen, and everyone looked as shocked as I felt. Gwen, wisely, made herself scarce.

"I hear you're looking for me," Andrew said, crossing his arms defiantly across his chest.

"I was," Micah confirmed. "Won't you sit down?"

"Naw. I'll stand."

"Would you rather speak in private?" Micah asked quietly.

Andrew snorted. "Nothing stays private around here for long."

Especially with Fang and Princess around.

HEY, the hellhound protested. YOU AND MICAH TOLD ME TO SNOOP. Princess didn't deign to respond.

I know. Sorry.

"All right, then," Micah said soothingly. "Why don't you tell me what happened at the blood bank?"

Andrew gestured curtly at me. "Didn't *she* tell you?"

"Yes, but I want to hear your side of the story."

Andrew sighed and dropped sullenly into a chair, the one Gwen had vacated. "It wasn't my fault. I was there, doing my watcher thing like you told me. I was keeping my cool, checking everything out and not bothering anyone, then this bloodsucker came up and called me a spy."

"Well, you were," I reminded him.

Fang shoved me with his shoulder. MICAH SAID TO TELL YOU YOU'RE NOT HELPING.

I shrugged an apology at Micah. *Tell Micah to ask Andrew about the blood poisoning and the books.*

DON'T WORRY. HE'LL GET TO IT.

"Yeah, I was spying," Andrew said. "But he didn't have to be such an a-hole about it. He really got in my face."

"Did he have a reason for it beyond the spying? Say, a threat to his blood supply?"

“Like how?” Andrew asked, confused.

NO CLUE ABOUT THE POISONING, Fang confirmed.

“Never mind,” Micah said. “So what did you do?”

Andrew shrugged one shoulder. “What do you expect? I didn’t want some dude breathing stale blood in my face. I shoved him away.” He paused, staring down at his clasped hands. “Then he flashed his fangs at me and hit me and I . . . hit back.”

Yeah, with fire.

HE’S TELLING THE TRUTH, Fang told us privately. HE WAS BLIND WITH RAGE, BECAUSE HE SOMEHOW BLAMES ALL VAMPS FOR HIS SISTER’S DEATH.

“I see,” Micah said with a sigh. “We’ll have to help you with your anger issues.”

Andrew glared at him. “Oh, yeah, how? Is there something in that encyclopedia that tells you how to do that? I’d like to see it.”

“Why?” Micah asked.

Andrew leaned forward, his gaze angry and intent . . . on me. “You’ve had the books all this time. Is there something there that told how to save my sister? How to keep me from dying like her?”

What? “No. I mean, I don’t know.” Maybe there was. I didn’t remember reading about fire demons.

“Then show me,” Andrew insisted. “Show me what it says about my kind.”

I spread my hands helplessly, feeling guilty. “I don’t have them.” I thought *Andrew* did.

NOPE, Fang said, sounding disappointed. HE DOESN’T HAVE THEM EITHER.

So that’s why Andrew had come here—he wanted to read the encyclopedia himself. And that bombshell just blew all our suspicions to smithereens.

But . . . if Andrew didn’t have the books, who did?

Try Me

Chapter Thirteen



Andrew swiveled to glare at Micah. “Well? How about it? Can I see the books?”

“I don’t have them on me,” Micah said calmly. “And I’m afraid I can’t loan them out to anyone until I’m certain we have a secure copy. But as soon as I learn anything about your kind, I’ll let you know.”

“Forget it,” Andrew snarled. “I want to see them *now*.”

Micah’s expression turned stony. “That won’t be possible.”

“Why? Because there’s something there you don’t want me to know?”

“Of course not.”

“Then prove it. Let me see them.”

“I can’t.”

Andrew made a disgusted sound. “You mean you won’t.”

“Why can’t he see them?” Mood asked, looking puzzled.

Micah squirmed. But before he could come up with another excuse, Princess said, BECAUSE THEY WERE STOLEN THE NIGHT OF THE PARTY. NOW GO AWAY. YOU ARE ANNOYING ME.

Everyone bent down to stare at the spaniel under the table. “That was supposed to be a secret,” Shade said gently.

Princess huffed and tossed her head. WHO CARES ABOUT YOUR SILLY SECRETS? Her nose in the air, she pushed past the table legs and trotted off into the other room.

Hasn’t your girlfriend learned the meaning of discretion? I asked Fang silently.

He somehow managed to look embarrassed. NOT REALLY. SHE'S A CUTIE, BUT NOT EXACTLY THE BRIGHTEST POOCH IN THE PACK. AND SHE HASN'T INTERACTED THAT MUCH WITH HUMANS, EITHER.

Plus she was a tad self-centered, but I decided not to mention that part.

Questions erupted around the table, and Micah held his hands up, looking annoyed. "All right, yes, they were stolen, but we're trying to find the thief. I wanted to keep it quiet until we found the books. Can I count on all of you to keep this to yourselves until we find him or her?"

Most everyone around the table nodded, but Andrew still looked ready to blow. "It was probably one of those bloodsuckers. They were there that night."

"We are questioning everyone who was there," Micah assured him. "But we were trying to do it discreetly."

Andrew's eyes narrowed. "Is that why you wanted to find me? You think I stole the books? I can't believe this." And before anyone could stop him, he threw his chair back and stormed out the door.

WELL, SO MUCH FOR GETTING HIM TO APOLOGIZE TO THE VAMPS, Fang said.

Not that I'd held out much hope for that, anyway.

Everyone else looked accusingly at Micah.

"He doesn't suspect any of his people," I assured them. "But I read the minds of the vamps who were there and cleared all of them, so I insisted we cover all the bases by checking all of you, too." Let them blame me instead of their leader.

"Well, I didn't do it," Mood said.

Micah smiled at her. "We know. We've cleared everyone here. But we haven't talked to the rest of the people at the party yet."

"I can't believe it was one of us," Mood said. "We have so much to gain by letting you maintain control of the books. Maybe it was someone else, someone who wasn't at the party but snuck into the office and took them."

"But how would they know I had them and was planning on bringing them that night?" I asked. "I didn't tell anyone except Micah and Fang."

They all looked at Fang.

He snorted. YEAH, RIGHT. WHAT WOULD I DO WITH BOOKS I CAN'T EVEN READ? BESIDES, ONE OTHER PERSON KNEW—TESSA. SHE HID THE BOOKS, REMEMBER?

They all thought for a moment. "Tessa?" one of the guys said. "No way."

"Why would she?" Micah asked. "She knew she'd have access to them from me."

Yeah, I couldn't see Tessa as any kind of thief. "No one else knew they were there."

Mood thought for a moment. “Maybe the books put off some kind of magick signature or something, that someone could follow.”

I shook my head. “One that only activated when I brought them to the club? Doesn’t make sense.”

Mood shrugged. “Just trying to figure out how they could have gone missing. They didn’t steal themselves. Or, at least, I assume they didn’t.”

Hey, with magick, who knew? “I’m betting on a person taking them,” I said with a smile.

“But *why* would someone steal them?” Mood asked. “And why are you keeping it a secret?”

Micah sighed. “Because we suspect something the thief read in the book may be responsible for the vampires going mad and killing people.”

Josh looked confused. “Vampires need a reason to kill people?”

“These ones do,” I insisted. “The New Blood Movement is trying too hard to convince humans they’re harmless. They wouldn’t deliberately kill anyone unless they were driven insane.”

“What about the other vamps?” Shade asked. “They’d have reason—they hate the Movement. And none of the independent ones have been affected.”

Micah nodded slowly. “A good point. But again, how would they know the books were there?”

Josh shrugged. “Cell phone. One of the other vamps called them and told them after the announcement.”

“That’s possible,” I conceded. “Anyone at the party could have called someone else . . . vampire, demon, or human.”

Crap. That also widened my pool of suspects exponentially. Well, if I was going to spend all my time tracking down the thief, maybe some of them could help with the rest of it. “Okay, let’s assume a bad vamp somehow found out about the books and took them.” Especially since I could tell they really liked that idea. “I’ll check that out, but we have another problem. The Movement blames us for their people going bonkers.”

Micah held up his hands to halt the protests and counter-accusations. “We really need to keep on their good side.”

“Why?” Josh demanded as Mood shook her head.

“Because we want to convince them not to come out and reveal themselves to the world. We can’t do that if we’re enemies. Besides, we’re *not* responsible and I, for one, don’t want to take the rap for it.”

THEY’RE BUYING IT, Fang said with a grin.

Because it was true. I opened my mouth to explain about the blood, but Fang pushed against my leg. LET SHADE DO IT. I glanced questioningly down at the hellhound and he gave a doggie shrug. IT’LL SOUND BETTER COMING FROM HIM. THEY ALREADY ACCEPT HIM AS A PART OF THE GROUP. YOU’RE STILL . . . ON PROBATION.

Okay, that was fair.

“If we help them find the cause of the madness, they’ll owe us,” Shade said. He went on to explain that we assumed it was the blood they drank that caused the problem.

Theories flew about the room, but basically it came down to the same two potential causes we came up with—silver or holy water.

“Val is going to get some of the blood to test,” Micah explained. “Then we’ll see if we can find out who’s causing this.”

“But you’re gonna still check out the vamps who aren’t in the Movement, right?” Mood asked me. “They have to be guilty.”

“Sure, I’ll check them out,” I said, “but I hope you’re wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because if the bad vamps have the books and they list the weaknesses of the demons as well, we could be in deep doo-doo.”



I took a long nap that afternoon, knowing I was probably going to be busy all night. It was kind of nice to wake up in my newly decorated bedroom with Fang snuggled up next to me. Here, I could pretend for awhile that nothing was wrong and all was right with the world.

I scratched his ears. “Hey, you stayed with me,” I said softly. “Princess losing her charms?”

He snuggled closer. NAW. BUT SOMETIMES SHE’S A BIT TOO HIGH MAINTENANCE. BESIDES, YOU NEED ME TONIGHT AND I NEEDED A LITTLE SHUT-EYE, TOO.

Good. The best way to learn where the bad vamps were hanging out was to attend the SCU briefing, and I didn’t want to do it alone. I opened my bedroom door to let Fang out to use the doggie door and came face to face with Shade.

All he said was, “Hi,” but to me, it sounded like a whole lot more. Like, I’m soooo glad to see you. Like, you are the hottest thing on two legs. Like, let’s get naked together.

I gulped, and was *really* glad I couldn’t see his expression right now. It would probably make me feel more self-conscious and dorky than I already did. As it was, I felt my face turn hot and Lola stirred, wanting to reach out and take some of that yummy goodness.

I pulled her back with an effort. “Hi,” I responded, feeling oh-so cool and sophisticated. Not.

He reached out to take my hand but I pretended not to see it as I took a step back and closed the door partway. “I need to get ready for work.”

“Oh. Sorry. I thought you might need to, uh, take the edge off first.”

Cuddle up to Shade's hot bod, lie there with his arms around me, let our wanting and need flow back and forth between us? Sounded like heaven, but sheesh, I hadn't even brushed my teeth yet. And for some reason, the thought of using him again made me a little uneasy. "No, I'm good."

He nodded and left as Fang came trotting back in through the door. I closed it and the terrier jumped up on the bed. WHAT WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?

"Nothing. Shade just wanted to . . . you know."

SO WHY DIDN'T YOU 'YOU KNOW'? 'YOU KNOW' CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU.

I shrugged, not really wanting to discuss it with anyone of the male persuasion. But, knowing Fang would bug me until I relented, I said, "Because . . . he wants it too much."

WELL, HE IS A GUY.

"Yeah, but . . . is it me he wants, or Lola?" There, I'd said it, exposed my insecurities to ridicule.

AH, THE AGE-OLD QUESTION, Fang said, amusement in his voice. DOES HE WANT YOU FOR YOU, OR FOR YOUR BODY?

"Well, yeah."

DOES IT MATTER? Fang asked. YOU LIKE IT, HE LIKES IT. SO WHY NOT DO IT? HUMANS HAVE TO COMPLICATE EVERYTHING.

I glanced down at the terrier. "Because it *is* more complicated for humans, Fang." It wasn't just about whether I wanted to feel all hot and sexy with him again, because I did, but was Lola something he could become addicted to? How did I even feel about Shade? Was I ready to lose my virginity with him? 'Cause that was sure the way it was heading. If Lola made me want every guy who came along, how could I trust *any* of my feelings? And until I figured it out, I didn't want to commit myself to anything. Not even asking him to Thanksgiving dinner.

Not wanting to prolong this conversation either, I said, "I'm going to shower."

COWARD, Fang called after me.

"Whatever."

I got ready for work—jeans, long-sleeved T-shirt with a vest over it to hide the stakes in my back waistband—and headed out on the Valkyrie in the cool night air. Fang rode behind me in his goggles. We got to the station a little early and I didn't feel like facing the other scuzzies right away, so I took the time to call Alejandro.

After Luis made me wait for awhile, Alejandro came on the line. "Yes, Ms. Shapiro, how may I help you?"

No sense in beating around the bush. "The demons feel bad about what's happening with your people. They know you suspect them, so to prove they're innocent, they'd like to help."

"Help how?"

“By trying to find out what’s causing your guys to go wacko. Unless you know already?”

“We haven’t yet found the cause, no.” He paused for a moment. “Help would not come amiss. What do you have in mind?”

“Well, since we all figure it’s in the blood they drank at the blood bank, we wondered if we could get a sample of it. Maybe we can help you test it, find out what’s causing it.”

“We are doing that ourselves.”

“So? It couldn’t hurt to have two sets of eyes looking at it. Maybe we’d think of something you wouldn’t.”

Alejandro sighed. “Very well. We don’t know which batches are contaminated and which are free of poison, but I shall send someone to drop off a representative sample. Where shall I send it?”

I thought for a moment. “Send it to Micah at Club Purgatory. He’ll know what to do.”

“I shall. The sooner we learn how the blood was poisoned, the better off we’ll all be.”

“You got that right.”

He hung up and I breathed a heavy sigh. Time to face the scuzzies. “Ready for this?”

Fang had managed to get his goggles off by himself and bristled with action. “YEAH. ANYONE WHO WANTS TO MESS WITH YOU WILL HAVE TO COME THROUGH ME FIRST.”

I laughed. “I can always count on you.” We were a few minutes late, so I was able to slip in the back with only a few wary glances. Lt. Ramirez was leading the session and he nodded at me but didn’t greet me by name, thank goodness. I took notes on the latest vampiric activity then darted out as soon as it was over so I wouldn’t have to face any of them. *Yes, I know. I’m a coward*, I told Fang.

NAW. I CALL IT SMART.

For that, I picked Fang up and kissed him on his cute fuzzy nose.

HEY, WATCH IT, he protested. SOMEONE COULD SEE. But since he licked my nose as he said it, I didn’t take him too seriously. I set him back down and we headed back to the Valkyrie.

My phone beeped—a text message from Micah. *There’s a problem at the club. Can you come right away?*

Crap. What now? *On my way*, I texted back. Fang and I jumped on the bike, not even stopping to put on his goggles.

ANY IDEA WHAT’S UP? Fang asked as I took off.

“No. But it can’t be good.”

It seemed to take forever to get there, though it couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Everything out front at Club Purgatory seemed normal so I decided to go in the back through the loading dock. Ludwig was standing guard outside, his arms folded. "Micah called me," I said, before he could ask.

He nodded and opened the door. Just inside where all the deliveries were made, Micah and Kyle were holding a low, tense conversation. "What's going on?" I asked.

Micah turned to me, looking worried. "Shawndra was attacked and dumped off here on the loading dock."

"Oh, crap. Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine," Kyle assured me, though Micah looked totally pissed.

"Do you think this has something to do with the encyclopedia?" I asked.

Micah scowled. "I'm sure of it. They left a page of it in her pocket, with a message for you."

"Huh?"

Micah showed it to me. Scrawled in blood-red letters across the page was a warning: *Slayer, back off. Or else.*

Try Me

Chapter Fourteen



I grabbed the encyclopedia page from Micah and scanned the text behind the handwriting. “This talks about an eco-demon. You think that means something?”

“Oh, I’m sure of it,” Micah bit out. “Shawndra is an eco-demon.”

“Plants and stuff? What’s demonic about that?”

Fang butted in. SHE CAN EITHER MAKE PLANTS GROW . . . OR WITHER AND DIE.

Oh. “So how was she injured? Did this tell how?”

“Yes. The page tells us if it can injure plants, it can injure Shawndra. The creep dumped something toxic on her—probably weed killer—and dumped her off here, where she went into convulsions.”

“Where is she now?”

“In the shower in my office,” Micah said. “Tessa is helping her. She seemed to get better as soon as we got the worst of the chemicals off her. Thankfully, he only got her arm. Tessa thinks she’ll be all right.”

Ludwig stuck his head in the door. “Hey, there are two others who want to see you. And a delivery.” He opened the door wider to show Dan and Luis standing there. Oh great. Neither one was exactly part of the Val Shapiro fan club.

“Let them in,” Micah said. “Kyle, if you’d take the delivery?”

Dan and Luis came in, keeping their distance from each other. “Did Lt. Ramirez send you?” Micah asked Dan. Dan nodded, and Micah turned to me. “I sent him a message at the same time I did you, Val, before I knew how serious this incident was.”

Micah turned to Luis, who was holding a cooler in one hand as if it would give him an STD or something. “How may I help you?”

Luis set the cooler on the ground and straightened his jacket, brushing invisible lint from his sleeve. “This is the package you requested from Alejandro,” he said, managing to sound offended by being reduced to a lowly messenger.

“Ah, yes. Thank you. We’ll see if we can help you learn anything.”

Luis raised one eyebrow in disbelief, then turned to go. Kyle passed him on his way in with a small box in his hands, asking, “Where do you want the silver nitrate, boss?”

Luis spun, quick as a snake and pinned Kyle up against the wall, the vamp’s arm across the demon’s throat and his fangs bared. “What need have you of silver nitrate in a *bar*, demon boy?”

I whipped out a stake and shoved the pointed end against Luis’s back, just enough to let him know it was poised against his heart but not enough to penetrate—yet. Though the poor dream demon had managed to keep his grip on the package, he looked terrified, unable to croak out an answer. That made me even more pissed at Luis. “Let him go, or your ass is ash, buster.”

“Wait, wait,” Micah said, his hands outspread in a calming motion. “The silver nitrate will be used to test the blood you gave us, to see if that’s what’s causing the madness. That’s all.” When Luis did nothing but glare at Micah, he added, “We can’t test for it if we don’t know what it looks like in the blood . . . and you obviously can’t handle the stuff to test it yourself, can you?”

“We’re on your side, asshole,” I muttered. “Let go.”

Somehow, my harsh words seemed to do more to convince Luis than Micah’s appeasing ones. Luis let go of Kyle and backed off, his hands raised and his fangs retracted. He turned toward Micah, but stopped abruptly when he saw Dan watching him with narrowed eyes and a loaded crossbow. And Fang, of course, was snarling at him, eyes purple with demonic anger.

“Gimme a reason, bloodsucker,” Dan muttered.

YEAH, JUST A LITTLE ONE, Fang begged.

Luis quirked his lips in something that was either a snarl or a contemptuous smile. “Call off your dogs.”

Fang snorted with disgust, whether at Luis’s lousy joke or at the cease and desist order, I wasn’t sure.

“Please,” Micah said to Dan and me.

I put the stake away as Dan lowered the crossbow, pale with some indefinable emotion. Kyle practically quivered with fear, but still managed to spit out, “You *ever* try to sink your fangs into my neck, bloodsucker, and you’ll regret it.”

“Faugh,” Luis said with a look of disgust. “Demon blood. Wouldn’t touch it.”

“Enough, gentlemen,” Micah said. “It was simply a misunderstanding. Kyle, if you wouldn’t mind giving me the box . . . ?”

Kyle pretended to a bravery he didn't have to bring Micah the small package. "Thank you," Micah said. "Why don't you go see how Shawndra is doing?"

Nodding, Kyle beat feet out of there.

Micah's expression hardened. "Now, if you are done jumping to conclusions and scaring the hell out of my employees . . . ?"

Luis sneered. "If I find that you are lying about the silver nitrate, not even Alejandro's will shall keep you safe."

THEN BULLY FOR US. WE'RE TELLING THE TRUTH, Fang answered for all of us.

Luis gave Micah a curt nod and clicked his heels in what could have been a bow, if an abbreviated one, then left. The tension left with him, thank goodness.

When he was gone, Dan said, "What the hell was that all about? That wasn't why you texted Lt. Ramirez, was it?"

"No," Micah said with a sigh. "*That* was unfortunate timing. The reason I called for help is because one of my people was injured."

Dan disarmed the crossbow. "Vamp?"

Micah shrugged. "I'm not sure." He glanced at me, mimed opening a book, and cocked an eyebrow at Dan.

Evidently he wanted to know if Dan knew about the encyclopedia. I shook my head. Not that I knew of.

Dan caught the byplay. "What's going on here? What are you keeping from me?"

"None of your business," I said, still annoyed with him. "It's Micah's concern, not yours."

Micah made calming motions with his hands. "And I'll be happy to tell you what's going on. But not here. Let's go to my office and I'll explain."

There, Tessa and Kyle were hovering over a sleeping Shawndra wrapped in a robe, with wet green hair. I'd thought it was dyed, but now that I knew she was an eco-demon, I wondered if it was natural.

"How's she doing?" Micah asked softly.

"Better," Tessa said. "Once we washed the chemicals off her, she stopped convulsing. Kyle put her in dreamland, but I don't know if she needs additional medical treatment. Her skin looks burned. We can't go to a hospital . . ."

Yeah, and we couldn't call Shade. He was supposed to be recovering. "Right." I pulled out my cell phone, looking for my roomie's cell number. "Call Gwen. She probably hasn't left for work yet." I handed Tessa my phone with Gwen's number on it.

Dan snatched my phone before Tessa could dial. "First, tell me what the hell is going on. You demons have dragged my sister into enough of your messes, don't you think?"

AND YOU HAD THE HOTS FOR THIS MENTAL CASE? Fang asked me in disbelief. WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

Well, when he wasn't all pissed and suspicious, he was pretty cute. And a great partner, besides. But right now, I could do without all the macho crap. Taking a deep calming breath, I said, "All Tessa is going to do is ask your sister how to treat Shawndra." It seemed to appease him, so I took my phone back and handed it to Tessa.

Dan's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong with her?"

"That's not important. What is important is that someone tried to harm her, deliberately. They knew what would hurt her the most, poisoned her, then dropped her here as a message."

Dan raised his eyebrow in a familiar questioning gesture.

I shrugged. "The message told me to back off. I think I'm getting too close to finding something that someone doesn't want found out."

"You going to?" he asked.

I glanced at Micah. "I don't see how I can." I had to find out who was doing this and stop them before more people were hurt.

Dan nodded as if he expected nothing less. "And what are you close to finding out?"

Heck, why not tell him? It seemed everyone else knew anyway. So, we told him about the theft of the books.

As Dan mulled it over, Tessa reported that Gwen recommended an antihistamine in case the problem was an allergic reaction and a lotion she could get at the drugstore.

After Tessa left, Dan said, "And Luis just happened to be on the scene right after the demon girl was dropped off?" He raised an eyebrow. "Convenient."

I shrugged. "A coincidence. I already cleared him."

Kyle gave Dan an odd look. "You were on the scene right after she was dropped off, too," he said, shifting his body between Dan's and the sleeping girl's.

Dan glared at the dream demon. "What are you saying? You think I'm responsible for this?"

Kyle didn't seem as afraid of the human as he'd been of the vampire. "I'm saying we haven't cleared *you*. How do we know you didn't take the encyclopedia?"

"I wasn't even there."

"No, but someone could have told you the books were there. And you're a detective. You were probably just waiting for Val to move the books so you could grab them."

"Why would I want them?" Dan asked incredulously.

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Oh, I dunno. Maybe because you hate and fear vampires and demons and want to clean up San Antonio and make it safe for your kind?”

Dan gaped at him for a moment. He couldn’t deny none of it was true. “Oh, come on. You can’t believe that. It’s ridiculous. Ramirez sent me. Tell him, Micah.”

Micah rubbed his hand over his face. “Kyle has a point, you know. And if he thought of it, others will, too. I hadn’t considered a normal human as the culprit.”

“But I don’t have the books,” Dan protested. “How can I convince you?”

Dan was far more likely to play the hero than the villain. I shook my head. “I believe him.”

Kyle shrugged. “Not exactly impartial, Slayer.” And by the way he looked at Dan, I could tell he was liking the idea of Dan being the bad guy more and more.

Fang huffed. I’M NOT HATING IT, MYSELF.

Yeah, okay. I was still ticked at my former partner, but I couldn’t let him take the rap for something I was sure he wouldn’t do. He might stake Luis, if Luis gave him a good reason. But throw toxic material on a teenaged girl and dump her? No way. “In case you haven’t heard, we’re not partners anymore,” I told Kyle.

“Okay, so prove his innocence like you did ours.”

“I can’t. I can’t read his mind and Fang can’t either.”

Kyle looked at the dog in surprise. Oops, I probably shouldn’t have revealed how we’d cleared everyone.

NAW, IT’S OKAY, Fang assured me. THEY KNEW I COULD READ THEIR MINDS, AND THEY WOULD HAVE PUT TWO AND TWO TOGETHER SOONER OR LATER.

Dan grimaced. “Don’t you have someone else who can do some mumbo jumbo and prove I’m telling the truth?”

Micah looked mildly offended. “The Demon Underground is not anyone’s personal magick shop. We also prize the privacy of our members. Even if we did have someone who could do ‘mumbo jumbo’ as you call it, I’m not sure I’d care to expose their powers to you. We prefer to keep that privileged information to ourselves.” He thought for a moment. “But there is someone who could force you to tell the truth . . .” He turned to stare at me. “Someone whose powers you’re already familiar with.”

Oh yeah, Lola could do the trick. And she perked up at the thought of getting her hooks into Dan again. But I really didn’t want to go there.

“No way,” Dan blurted out, holding up both hands and backing away as if to ward me off.

METHINKS HE DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH, Fang said wryly.

“Something to hide?” Kyle asked suspiciously.

“No. That’s not it. I—”

He broke off, so I finished his sentence for him. “He doesn’t want me to use my ability on him,” I explained. “I have cooties.”

NO, YOU HAVE POWER OVER HIM, Fang corrected me. POWER HE DOESN’T UNDERSTAND BUT SECRETLY ENJOYS. DAN HATES THAT.

So now the hellhound was an amateur psychologist?

Dan slanted me an exasperated glance. “Don’t be ridiculous. But having that much control over men’s minds isn’t right.”

NOT TO MENTION THEIR BODIES, Fang said with a leer.

I shook my head, feeling tired of the whole thing. But I knew Dan had a thing about being controlled after he was enthralled by a lustful female vamp a few weeks ago. “Don’t worry, Dan, I’m not going to touch you. And neither is Lola.”

“Then how is he going to prove his innocence?” Kyle persisted.

Dan looked like he was about to blow his top, but Micah made a calming motion again. “Please. Kyle has the right to ask, and I’d like to eliminate you as a suspect so we can move on. Lieutenant Ramirez would like that, too, I’m sure. Val has more control now, so the questioning would be very brief, then over.”

“And I heard you owe Micah a favor,” Kyle put in.

Dan glanced at me, looking torn. After a moment, he shook his head. “I do owe you a favor, but not this. I can’t.”

For some stupid reason, that hurt. I mean, I knew he didn’t like being in Lola’s clutches, but he should know by now that he could trust me, trust Micah. Guess he still thought of me as a thing . . . a monster.

WELL, SCREW HIM, Fang said.

I grinned. I could always count on Fang to be on my side. *Lola and I tried, but didn’t get very far.*

Fang snorted, but luckily, the others didn’t hear.

Kyle stared at Dan, his eyes narrowed. “You say you’re innocent but won’t do the one thing that would prove it one way or the other. Sounds like guilt to me.”

Dan clenched his fists and glared down at the slight demon. “I don’t need to prove myself to you.”

“You do, actually,” Micah said, looking suspicious now himself. “Or, rather, to the Demon Underground. With your known association with Val who had the books, your dislike of vampires and distrust of demons, plus your refusal to clear yourself, you are obviously a prime suspect.” He raised his hand to stop Dan from interrupting. “You know that your lieutenant uses us to gather intelligence for him on the vampires in San Antonio. I’m afraid we might have to stop that if you are in the SCU and benefiting from any information we have to share.”

I stared at him. “You can’t be serious.” If he threatened to cut Ramirez off, Dan might lose his job.

Micah shook his head. “I have to be, Val. I have to think of my people first.”

Surprisingly, Dan seemed to understand that reasoning. “I get it, but I don’t like it. I’ll take some unpaid leave until you find the thief.”

“I have a better idea,” Micah said. “Why don’t you and Val work as partners again? That way you can help find the thief and stop this damage, and Val and Fang will be able to keep an eye on you for us.”

Kyle nodded. “Works for me.”

Dan crossed his arms, but nodded as well. “I’ll have to talk to Ramirez first, but if he agrees, it’s a deal.”

Well, crap. Didn’t I get a vote? Why on earth would I want to take Dan on as a partner again? And what was Micah thinking? Was he trying to play matchmaker or something? This was soooo not what I wanted.

Try Me

Chapter Fifteen



The next days fell into a pattern. I slept in the morning, questioned demons in the afternoon while trying to keep Shade and Lola from playing touchy-feely, and used the candle method to try to contain Lola. At night, I spent awkward times with Dan as he, Fang and I fruitlessly hunted the streets of San Antonio for misbehaving bloodsuckers. Not exactly like old times, except for the part where I had to concentrate hard to keep Lola from trying to feed on my partner.

It was a relief when Micah called and asked me to be present at a meeting with him and Alejandro. Thankfully, I let Dan attend the SCU briefing alone and arranged to meet him at my place afterward.

The vampires and demons met on neutral ground, in a hotel downtown. A really hoity toity place with a meeting room that looked like a men's club, or what I imagined a men's club to look like anyway—sleek brown leather, dark wood, shiny crystal and gold accents.

Fang paused in the doorway. SHEESH. KINDA MAKES ME FEEL GUILTY FOR SHEDDING ALL OVER IT. He shrugged and trotted in. OR NOT.

Alejandro brought two of his lieutenants with him—Luis and Austin—and Micah brought Ludwig, Fang, and me.

I LIKE THESE ODDS, Fang said. THREE OF THEM, FOUR OF US.

I grinned down at the small terrier. *Well, three and half, maybe.*

HEY, BABE, DON'T CUT YOURSELF SHORT LIKE THAT.

I shook my head. There was no way to win in a verbal contest with Fang, so I glanced around. The vamps looked at home, but the rest of us . . . not so much. It was a strange group to be facing each other across a polished cherry conference table. I glanced at the man mountain, wondering what kind of demon he was and why Micah had brought him instead of Tessa.

Probably for the same reason I figured he'd asked me to come—to help control anything that got out of hand. Unfortunately, I was having problems controlling myself right now. Or rather, Lola. She remembered enthralling these three vamps before. Remembered it, liked it, and wanted more. Keeping her under control and her hooks out of Dan and Shade had caused me to go without feeding for far too long. The hunger gnawed at me and Lola was constantly present, urging me to slake her appetite with any available male. But I locked her down tight. This was so not the time.

Alejandro steepled his fingers. In his tailored suit, crisp shirt, and silk tie, he looked the very image of a Wall Street banker . . . if it weren't for his long flowing hair. And the fangs.

WELL, HE IS A BANKER OF SORTS, the hellhound reminded me.

Glad for the distraction, I smothered a laugh. Yeah, with a slightly different currency.

“Thank you for meeting with us,” Alejandro said. “I understand you have been testing the blood from our banks. What did you learn?”

Micah nodded. “We have a medical technician among us who tested the blood for water—in case it was holy water—silver nitrate, and other foreign substances. He found nothing.” He spread his hands. “Then again, the bottles of blood you gave us didn't look as though they'd been tampered with, so we can't be sure they were.”

Alejandro's two lieutenants shifted as if they wanted to respond, but deferred to their boss. “We sent a representative batch from both locations where my people were poisoned. We did not find any breach of the bottles' seal either. However, my people are also trained to detect any tampering with the bottles. They would not have used it if there was something wrong with the seal.”

Micah leaned forward. “But people get lax, forget procedures. Are you certain they didn't forget to check?”

“All five of them?” Alejandro countered. “I think not. And it is beyond the bounds of reason to think that they drank the only contaminated packages of blood in the bank. That would be too much of a coincidence.”

Micah nodded slowly. “I take it you didn't find anything in the blood either.”

“Nothing,” Alejandro confirmed. “And none of our other bottles appear to be tampered with. We tested one with . . . a volunteer . . . who ended up in the same condition as the other five.”

Fang snorted at my feet. WONDER WHAT THE POOR GUY DID TO GET VOLUNTEERED.

Probably one of the vamps not in the Movement. I piped up. “Well, if the bottle didn't look like anyone messed with it, then maybe the contamination was in the human donating.”

I was pretty proud of myself for that reasoning, but Luis sneered. “Did you really assume we would not think of that?”

“We did,” Alejandro said with a quelling glance at Luis. “Each of our bottles is labeled with the donor's name, since some of my people have their favorite flavors.”

Ew. That conjured up visions of a vampire tasting room, people lined up unconscious in glass coffins along the wall with tubes coming out of their veins and flowing into wine glasses. I suppressed a shiver. You'd never catch me donating blood.

Alejandro continued. "Since the labels were still intact on the bottles the mad ones drank, we tested a couple of donors to see if they were contaminated. They were not."

"Maybe it wasn't the blood," I suggested. "Maybe it was something else causing it."

"Such as?" Luis asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I don't know. Maybe they all visited someplace where they caught a rare disease or something."

Luis was too stuck-up to roll his eyes, but his nostrils flared in derision. "Have you never heard of Occam's Razor?"

"Huh?" Did anyone else think that was totally random?

Austin grinned at me. "Basically, it means the simplest explanation that is based on the facts is the most likely. Occam was the fourteenth century friar who came up with the idea."

Oh. Why couldn't Luis have just said that?

BECAUSE HE HAS TO FIND SOME WAY TO PRETEND HE'S SUPERIOR, Fang said. I BET HE HAS A TINY WEENIE, TOO.

Good thing I wasn't drinking anything or that would have caused an instant spit-take. As it was, I had to pretend I was coughing to cover the choking laughter. *You may be right, but I sure ain't checking his tighty whities.*

At least Fang's diversion allowed me to respond to Luis without anger. "Okay, let's assume it is in the blood in the bottles. If the bottles don't show any signs of tampering, how else is the poison getting in there?"

Luis gave me a tight smile. "Demon magick, perhaps? I notice there have been no more attacks on your kind."

Everyone around the table stiffened.

"I see," Micah said, sounding calm but looking as though he'd like to rip Luis's head off. "This is why you invited me here today."

Alejandro spread his hands. "If you have another explanation, I would be most happy to hear it."

Leaning forward menacingly, Ludwig bit out, "How about your people are faking it and using this so-called madness to revert to their real nature without consequences?"

Luis bolted up out of his seat. "How dare you!" He slapped his hands down on the table and practically hissed at Ludwig. "Demon spawn—"

The man mountain lunged across the table, his meaty paw headed for Luis's throat. Luis snarled back, fangs gleaming, and batted Ludwig's hand out of the way then leapt across the table . . . and the fight was on. Though the other men in the room tried to stop them, it was as if they weren't even there.

Oh, crap. Lola loved it, lapping up all that wonderful testosterone. This was not good.

AN UNDERSTATEMENT, Fang agreed. *DO SOMETHING.*

It was as if Fang had given Lola permission. My succubus shredded the barrier I had put up and burst forth, instantly sending surges of lustful energy into the men in the room and enslaving them . . . all but Micah, of course. "Stop," I yelled.

They obeyed me immediately, each man turning to look at me as if waiting for further orders.

Fang nudged me. UH, NOT EXACTLY WHAT I MEANT.

"Val," Micah said warningly, "what are you doing?"

Dumb question. He knew exactly what I was doing. But I was fighting too hard with Lola to answer him. She wanted to surge along the connection, stroke their chakras, suck up all that yummy energy. But though she had them thoroughly caught in her web, I wouldn't let her feed. It seemed like a violation of hospitality or at least a breach of our unspoken treaty.

"You haven't fed recently, have you?" Micah demanded. "Why didn't you use Shade?"

Since I couldn't answer him, Fang did. *SHE'S AFRAID SHADE WILL BECOME TOO LOVEY DOVEY. SHE DIDN'T FEED ON HIM SO SHE REALLY NEEDS IT NOW, BUT SHE'S AFRAID TO LET GO AND TAKE ANYTHING FROM THE POOR LITTLE BLOODSUCKERS.*

Traitor.

Micah watched me thoughtfully. "She has a good point—we don't want to offend our potential allies. Since your succubus doesn't work on my incubus, please feed on Ludwig." He glanced at the large man. "He should be punished for resorting to violence, anyway. At least, I hope he considers it a punishment."

I didn't want to feed on *anyone*, but Lola wouldn't give up her prey, and I wouldn't let her loose. Stalemate. Micah's solution was my only option—the only good one, anyway. Wonder if that was someone's razor, too.

I wasn't sure if I could separate him out from the pack, but I tried it, gingerly. Given permission to nibble on Ludwig, Lola surged into him and plucked all of his strings, making him vibrate with desire, forcing him to worship and adore the goddess that was Val. It was kind of sickening, actually. When he tried to embrace me, I forced him to stay where he was. As Lola hovered up the energy he generated, I dialed it down from fire hose strength to more like a garden hose.

And now that Lola was occupied, I was able to disengage from the vamps. "I'm going to let go of the others now," I told Micah.

I gently released the vamps, and Alejandro immediately said, "Luis, no."

Good thing, 'cause he had my murder in his eyes.

"She didn't know any other way to stop the two of you without harming you," Micah told Luis quickly.

Alejandro nodded. "I know. She could have done much worse, but chose not to. We understand the pressures of the young newly coming into their powers. Do we not, Luis?"

Luis grimaced but Austin tried to hide a grin. Interesting. I wondered what the story was behind that. But Luis merely gave a curt nod.

"My apologies," Alejandro said with a slight bow. "The lack of an abundant supply of nourishment is making us all . . . testy."

Micah smiled back at him. "I should apologize as well. Ludwig is rather short-tempered." He glanced at the man, who was still in my thrall. "You can release him now, Val."

Oops. It had felt so good to feel satisfied again, the hidden wells of my body stoked once more, I had kind of forgotten I had Ludwig on a string. Lola was just playing with him now, getting him all hot and bothered. Luckily, she hadn't gone all the way to suck him dry. Embarrassed, I let him go. Now I kind of understood how the vamps felt after not feeding for awhile.

"Sorry," I told Ludwig.

NO WORRIES, Fang said. HE ENJOYED IT ALL RIGHT, BUT FEELS SICK THAT HE HAD THE HOTS FOR A GIRL HIS DAUGHTER'S AGE.

True, he did look a little stunned and horrified. Good—it was a punishment after all.

Micah gave him a stern look. "It wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't lost control." Then to everyone else in the room, he said, "Let's all sit down and see if we can discuss this rationally."

Luis and Austin took their cue from Alejandro and returned to the table. As everyone took their seats, Micah added, "After what happened with Lily Armstrong, we're all aware that one person's secret ambitions can have a devastating effect on an organization. But I believe both the New Blood Movement and the Demon Underground are united in wanting to find the culprit, whether vampire, demon, or human, and put a stop to the damage he or she is inflicting on both organizations."

"Very true," Alejandro murmured. "The organization should not be held responsible for the actions of one aberrant individual." He stared at Luis as if to bore that into his head.

NOT SURE THAT'S GONNA WORK, Fang muttered. HIS HEAD'S A BIT THICK.

"A change of subject," Micah proposed. "How are Lorenzo, Corina, and the others doing?"

"Better. But not entirely recovered yet. It may take some time for the poison to work its way out of their system."

Micah nodded. "Are they able to talk yet? Rationally?"

"Not yet. But when they are, we hope they may be able to shed some light on what happened." He spread his hands. "As you can see, tempers are growing short. Now that we've learned the donors are not the cause, we plan to reopen the blood banks for personal donations—no storage."

"Do you think that's wise?" Micah asked. "The banks may be a target."

Alejandro nodded. "We plan to add more security."

"I can add some of my people as well, if you think it will help," Micah offered.

YEAH, SINCE THEY'RE WATCHING THE VAMPS AT THE BLOOD BANKS ANYWAY.

Weird. Everyone knew it, but pretended like they didn't.

IT'S CALLED DIPLOMACY, BABE.

Alejandro nodded his acceptance. Well, at least the two leaders agreed, but I wasn't sure all their followers were totally on board. Not judging from their expressions, anyway.

"I assume this means you are not planning to come out nationally anytime soon?" Micah ventured cautiously.

Luis's mouth tightened but Alejandro quelled him with a glance. "For the moment, until this . . . issue is resolved. But we do plan to announce our existence. We would prefer to do it with you rather than without you, but either way, it will eventually happen."

Now Ludwig didn't look happy, but Micah merely nodded thoughtfully. "We have not yet come to an agreement, and some of the demons are very unhappy about it."

"And if these are the ones who are poisoning my people?" Alejandro asked with an arch of his eyebrow.

"Then I will ensure they are dealt with."

"How can we trust you to do that?" Luis asked skeptically.

"Indeed," Alejandro said. "What assurance do we have that you will do as you promise?"

Micah spread his hands. "What assurances would you accept?"

They all stood quietly for a moment, and I could feel the tension rise as both sides regarded each other with suspicion. Crap. Any moment now, they'd be at each other's throats again. Abruptly, I blurted out, "I'll be your assurance."

Everyone looked at me like I was crazy, so I added quickly, "If Micah breaks his word, or if any more of his people try to harm yours, I'll quit my job and work for Alejandro."

"Val, no," Micah said. "I can't let you take on my debts."

I raised my chin. "You can't stop me."

HEY, BABE, DID YOU THINK THIS THROUGH? Fang sounded worried.

Not really, but I had faith in our ability to make sure that didn't happen.

Alejandro glanced at me questioningly. "I have your word?"

I nodded.

A smile curved Alejandro's lips. "Then I accept. If the perpetrators of this outrage are not appropriately punished or if any more demons try to harm mine, the Slayer will work for me."

Micah frowned. "I assure you, we are doing all that we can to find the thief and stop this terrorism."

"Do more," Alejandro suggested. Then, without another word, he and his minions left.

"Whew," Ludwig said on an explosive breath. "Boss, you can't—"

Micah stopped him with an upraised hand. "Not now, Ludwig. This is a discussion for the entire organization. Would you wait outside for a moment . . . and try not to get into trouble?"

The big man nodded, looking like a guilty child, and stepped outside.

Now it was my turn. Micah turned to me. "What the hell were you thinking, offering yourself as assurance?"

Sheesh. It wasn't so amusing when he used that tone on me. "Do you know of a better way to keep his vamps from hunting for demon blood?"

Micah ran a weary hand over his face. "I guess not." But he wasn't letting me off the hook. "Do I need to say anything about you losing control there?"

"Nope. I get it. Bad Val. Bad Lola."

He raised an eyebrow. "That's not what I meant. I appreciate you helping to stop the fight, but I wish you had more control while doing it. You know that you can't go so long without feeding, Val. As you just demonstrated, the consequences are . . . not good."

Obviously.

Fang had to butt in. SHE'S AFRAID SHADE IS STUCK ON HER.

I glared at him and muttered, "Some friend you are."

HEY, KIDDO, I HAVE TO LIVE IN YOUR HEAD, TOO. YOU THINK IT'S FUN FOR ME WATCHING YOU GET MORE AND MORE WORKED UP WITH NO OUTLET? WHY DO YOU THINK I WAS SO GLAD TO FIND PRINCESS?

Oh. Sheesh, I hadn't thought about how my struggle would affect Fang and his libido. "Sorry."

"You need to come to an agreement with Shade or someone," Micah insisted. "As you can see, your lack of control is affecting everyone around you."

Try Me

“I know. I’m sorry. I’ll . . . figure out something.” I had to. Micah was right. I couldn’t keep losing control like this. One day I might go too far and suck the life out of someone. And that would make me no better than the vampires I slayed.

Try Me

Chapter Sixteen



After I left the hotel, I went back home to get Dan. Gwen must have gone to bed or to work, Shade was sacked out on the couch with a demon watching him and reading a book, and Dan was spread out in Gwen's recliner, eyes closed as he listened to something on his ear buds.

I nodded at the demon watcher and decided not to disturb anyone else. As Fang went off to do . . . whatever he did with Princess, I headed into my bedroom so I could have a few precious minutes alone for a change. I'd wanted friends, yeah, but sheesh, there was such a thing as too much togetherness.

I'd planned to collapse on the bed for a few minutes, but I saw a wrapped package sitting on it. There was a cute card with a note inside from Shade: "I missed your birthday, so consider this a belated birthday gift."

Emotions warred within me . . . excitement—no guy had ever given me a gift before—and trepidation as I wondered what the gift was and what it meant.

I opened it and smiled. He'd found a couple of graphic prints with chocolate brown dogwood branches against an ice blue sky. Thank heavens, the gift wasn't too personal. I sighed in relief.

"Do you like them?" Shade asked from the doorway behind me.

I turned to smile at him. "They match the room perfectly. Thank you so much. But you shouldn't have."

He shrugged and leaned against the door jamb, his expression all swirly. "It's the least I can do after you've let me stay at your place."

I relaxed even more. That was a reason I could understand. "Well, since you insisted on taking the couch, how could I possibly mind?"

"Yes, but they could baby-sit me at my place just as well as here. I know Micah wants me here to make it look like I need more help than I really do, but . . ." He paused, then asked abruptly, "Val, do you want me to leave?"

Oh, crap. I couldn't read his expression, but from the tone of his voice, I gathered he was maybe hurt or something. How the heck could I answer that? "Of course not—"

Dan stuck his head in. "Oh, sorry, am I interrupting?" Yeah, right, like he didn't know. "Thought you might want to hit the streets again while it's still dark."

Whew. Saved by the nosy partner. "Uh, yeah, sure," I told him. "Shade, I need to go to work. Can we talk about this when I get back?"

He nodded. "Sure. See you then." And he turned around and walked off.

Dan raised an eyebrow. "What was that all about?"

Ignoring the question, I said, "I'm ready. Let me get Fang and we can go."

Fang followed us to the truck Dan drove. Provided by the SCU, the silver Dodge Ram had an extended cab and doors reinforced with vampire-repelling silver. Fang leapt up easily—sometimes I swore that terrier had springs for legs—and I scrambled in after him. "So, anything good come from the briefing?"

Dan pulled out of the parking lot. "No. How about you? Anything come out of your meeting I should know about?"

"No."

WOW. SCINTILLATING CONVERSATION, YOU TWO.

I nudged Fang but didn't respond. I was tired of trying to act like everything was normal, like nothing was wrong. I turned to stare out the window, hoping to see some kind of fang to neck activity so I didn't have to spend another night locked up in this truck with a distant Dan.

After an hour of silence—well, except for the running commentary provided by Fang on Dan's probable ancestry—I finally had enough of it. "I don't like this any more than you do, you know."

Dan grunted but didn't say anything else. Too bad I didn't speak grunt. And I was sick of him treating me like a leper. "I don't want to be out every night with some guy who's afraid I'm going to rape him or something. I'm not exactly pining away for you like some lovesick kid, so just get over yourself, Dan."

FINALLY, Fang said with a heavy mental sigh. NOW CAN I GO DO SOMETHING MORE FUN? LIKE SHOVE A STICK IN MY EYE?

"I know," Dan said briefly.

He didn't even sound ticked. "What?"

"I know. All of that. You're right."

Well, yeah, but Dan hadn't actually been seeing eye to eye with me lately. "What's with the change of heart?"

He stared out the windshield as he drove the quiet streets of San Antonio. “Gwen lit into me. Told me I’d been acting like a jerk.”

GO, GWEN, Fang said admiringly.

Dan continued staring out the front of the vehicle, avoiding my eyes. “I— I just—” He scrubbed a hand across his face. “Ah, hell. This is hard.”

At times like these, I wished Fang could read his mind as well. But since he couldn’t, I had to wait to see if Dan could find the guts to say what he’s feeling. “It’s okay, Dan. Take your time.”

He nodded. A few minutes later, he said softly, “I wanted this to work out between us, I really did. But . . .”

Pain and regret rolled through me. I’d wanted it, too. “But . . .?”

“But the age difference, the difference in our backgrounds, our working together, your super powers, Lola . . .”

“No. Nicole is a friend, nothing more.”

“Yeah, I get that.” At first, Dan had been impressed by my so-called super powers, but I understood how some guys could feel intimidated. I just hadn’t thought Dan was one of those guys. “You’re right, too. Maybe demons and humans should stay with their own kind.” Less pain that way. Look what had happened to my father when he’d married a human.

He finally glanced at me. “Is that why you and Shade . . .?”

“You and Nicole . . .?” I mocked him.

Dan was deluding himself. The petite blonde obviously had a thing for my partner’s hotness, whether he realized it or not. And he liked playing the big protective hero . . . which he couldn’t do with me. A match made in heaven. But I doubted Dan would appreciate those insights, so I dropped the subject.

Dan, however, wouldn’t let it go. “You and Shade . . .?”

“What do you care, Dan?”

“I care. I may not want us to be together, but I do care about you. And hooking up with a shadow demon . . . not sure that’s such a good idea.”

“I am not ‘hooking up’ with him,” I said, exasperated.

“So what was it when I caught the two of you in bed together?”

Fang snorted. FOR A GUY WHO DOESN’T WANT YOU, HE SURE SOUNDS AWFULLY JEALOUS.

I sighed. “Let me ask you this. What happens if you stop eating to the point where you starve yourself?”

He thought for a moment. “I die.”

“Well, when Lola starves, someone *else* dies.” I paused, trying to figure out how to explain it. “Look, if Lola doesn’t . . . feed . . . often enough, she gets so hungry, it’s all I can think about, all I can do to hold her back.” It used to be easier, before I learned to let loose. Now I sometimes felt like a loose cannon, about to explode and blow everyone around me to smithereens. “Micah is trying to help me learn to control it by letting her out a little at a time under controlled circumstances. And Shade is . . .”

“The *feedee*?” Dan asked, a smile in his voice.

“You could say that. He’s helping me learn to deal with my inner demon, that’s all.” And he didn’t think of it as *rape*, like a particular cop of my acquaintance.

Dan pulled over to the side of the road near some park so he could look me in the eyes. “Okay, so what was all that tension about between the two of you before we left?”

Did I really want to talk about a possible new boyfriend with my ex-boyfriend?

Fang chuckled in my mind. AW, GO AHEAD. I WANNA WATCH.

Why not? Dan was a guy. Maybe he had some insight or inside information on how the alien creatures thought. And the darkness helped make it a little easier, somehow. “He’s allowed me to uh, practice on him, but . . .” I squirmed, not sure how to put it. “I think maybe he likes it too much.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? You get what you need and he gets what he wants.”

“It’s not that simple. It’s all mixed up with . . . other stuff.” Other stuff I was *not* going to talk about with Dan. Oh, great, now I sounded totally lame. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. “I’ve been avoiding him. That’s the tension you sensed.”

“You like him?” Dan asked quietly.

“No. Yeah. I don’t know.”

“But you feel like it’s moving too fast.”

My shoulders sagged with relief. “Yeah.” That was it—he understood.

“Well, why don’t you tell him that? If he’s a decent guy, he’ll understand.”

“You think?”

“Yep.”

Fang crawled into my lap. WELL, WHADDAYA KNOW? DAN CAME THROUGH WITH SOME GOOD ADVICE.

“Okay, I’ll try it. Thanks.” And I still needed to find the right time to ask him about Thanksgiving . . .

Standing up suddenly, Fang said, ROLL DOWN THE WINDOW. I THINK I SMELL ME SOME VAMPIRE.

I cracked the window and Fang's eyes flared purple. "Fang smells vamp," I told Dan quietly. "But I don't see anything yet. How do we play this?"

He unbuckled his seat belt. "Why don't we go for a walk in the park, just a guy, a girl and their dog?"

Okay, we were going to play bait. No problem. "Chill," I said quietly to Fang. "Your eyes are glowing."

He tamped down the purple and we got out of the car to stroll in the park. Fang put his nose down to the ground and followed the smells to a worn path into the trees. HE'S GOING THIS WAY. I THINK HE'S FOLLOWING SOMEONE.

I told Dan what Fang had said and we picked up our speed, trying to be quiet, but hoping to catch the bloodsucker before he could do any actual fanging. I palmed a stake and kept it mostly hidden behind my wrist. Dan pretended to put his arm on my shoulder while hiding a small crossbow behind my back. As for Fang, he was already armed with his weapons—teeth, claws, and the ability to talk anyone to death.

HEY, I HEARD THAT.

I grinned. *You were supposed to.*

Fang halted, one paw poised for the next step, and lifted his head. HE'S STOPPED.

I slowed and motioned for Dan to do the same. We crept up silently around a curve in the trail. Sure enough, there was a guy in a dark hat and cloak watching . . . a comely tavern wench?

MAYBE IT'S A UNIFORM FROM A BAR OR SOMETHING. Fang snorted. YE OLDE CAT HOUSE, LOOKS LIKE.

Weird. She did look rather . . . voluptuous. Maybe it was a costume from the Society for Creative Anachronism. Those people who dressed up like extras at a Renaissance Fair.

The vamp leaped out at her, she screamed, and I was on him in a second flat. I bowled him over and held my stake poised to strike, but the girl screamed again. "No, no. Don't hurt him."

Huh? When I paused, the vamp slammed his will into mine, trying to enthrall me.

Gotcha now, dude. "What's going on here?" I demanded.

The girl tried to reach for me, but Dan held her back. "Please," she said. "Don't hurt him. We were just playing a game."

I stared down at the vamp in dismay. She was right. From the memories in his mind and the marks on her neck, this husband and wife played Dracula and the Tavern Wench often.

Oh, crap. I scrambled up off him as Fang cackled in my mind. "She's right," I told Dan, pretending like I was brushing dirt off my sleeve but trying not to laugh.

"Who are you?" the wench asked.

“They call her the Slayer,” Dan said with a significant glance at our wannabe Dracula, who looked more like the Prince of Geeks than the Prince of Darkness.

OH, LORD. SAVE ME FROM GAMERS, Fang drawled.

I didn’t realize a vamp could pale even more than pasty white. He scrambled to his feet and retrieved his hat. “I didn’t—I wasn’t—”

“It’s okay, I know.” But maybe I could salvage something from this mess. “Are you part of the New Blood Movement?”

The vamp shook his head. “No, but I’ve heard of it.” He glanced at his very human wife. “I don’t need their blood banks.”

No, he had his own portable one at home. Ick. But he didn’t seem like a bad sort. He had gotten caught up in one too many role-playing games, was all. Unfortunately for him, one of those games had turned real, and he’d ended up in a permanent role as a creature of the night.

“Do you know anything about the poisoning going on at the blood banks?” Dan asked harshly.

“No . . . no! I don’t go near those places.”

I nodded at Dan. He was telling the truth.

“How about your bloodsucking friends?” Dan pressed. “Any of them know anything?”

“I-I don’t have any vampire friends.”

Strange, he was still telling the truth. I told Dan so. Dan looked exasperated, but asked, “Any clue whatsoever where we might find some unaffiliated vamps who might know something?”

The guy thought hard. “I’ve heard some rumors about a bar downtown where a group of vampires hang out in a private room, but that’s all.”

“Not part of the New Blood Movement?” Dan asked.

“No,” the girl said and pulled her arm from Dan’s grasp. “They sound like a bunch of poseurs. We avoid them but they hang at Club Gothique downtown.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said. “You can go now.”

Giving us dirty looks over their shoulders, they hurried off to play their game somewhere else.

We couldn’t afford not to check it out. Dan drove to the bar and as we got out of the truck, I glanced at the Club Gothique sign, the dark red script written in a blood-dripping horror movie font. “Are they for real?” I asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “Maybe they figure hiding in plain sight is the way to go.”

Dogs weren't welcome in most places that served food, so we left Fang outside. We entered the darkened bar, sullenly lit with red lights spaced along the walls. A live band played loud heavy metal music on the far end of the bar, and the denizens wore black, black, and more black, with touches of stark white, purple, dark red, and the glint of metal from multiple body piercings.

We didn't exactly fit in, as the hostile looks of the patrons testified.

Dan leaned down to shout in my ear so he could be heard over the music. "Sense any vamps here?"

I shook my head. "But that doesn't mean they aren't here." We'd have to find that private room.

Dan gestured with his head toward the bar. As we reached it, the band came to a crashing, screeching halt and announced they were taking a break. Thank God. My ears were ringing.

The bartender looked almost normal, with minimal body piercings and no black lipstick or make-up. Dan smiled and asked for the private party.

The bartender quirked a smile. "Sorry, it's by invitation only."

Dan flashed his badge. "Will this do?"

The barkeep's expression turned wary. "Hey, I don't want any trouble."

"And you won't get any, if you cooperate. We only want to ask them a few questions."

The man shrugged. "Hey, no skin off my nose. I just work here." He nodded toward a door at the opposite end of the bar from the band. "It's not locked. Go right in."

Dan glanced at me as we headed for the private room. "You ready for this?"

"Yeah. Let's do it."

Dan tensed then nodded to me and flung open the door.

I'd tensed up, too, but nothing attacked. A bunch of people, mostly in the eighteen to twenty-five age range, lay sprawled on red velvet sofas around the room, smoking, necking, and doing a variety of other things Lola was rather interested in, but I wasn't.

"Hey," one young man said. "Who invited you?"

Dan closed the door behind us, ignoring the question. "We're looking for vampires. Any here?"

The crowd parted to reveal a Morticia Addams look-alike, dramatically dressed in a black skintight dress trailing cobwebby fringe. She stepped from the back of the room, stood hipshot with her hands on her tiny waist, and opened her mouth in a snarl to reveal her "fangs."

Oh, spare me. "Filing your eyeteeth to points doesn't make you a vampire." Just sick.

“You’re right,” Morticia said with an annoyed smile. “But drinking blood does.” She wiped a drop of something nonexistent from the corner of her blood-red lips.

Dan grinned. I had to agree. It was so . . . hokey. I couldn’t imagine any real vampire wearing such constricting clothing. Not if they wanted to move fast.

“Any *real* vampires here?” Dan asked.

Morticia actually hissed. “Come closer and you’ll find out.”

I had to laugh. “Nice try. But you’re nothing but a cliché.”

Her eyes narrowed, but before she could say anything, one of her girlfriends interrupted, pointing at me. “I know you—you’re that vampire killer who was at the rally on the Day of the Dead.”

Morticia backed up a step, fear flashing in her eyes.

If there were any real vamps in the room, they would have either bolted toward me or away from me by now. Instead, they cringed back in alarm. I turned around and opened the door. “Don’t worry, I only hunt real vamps. Not kid-die wannabes.” On that note, we left the room and closed the door behind us.

Dan grinned at me. “Great exit line.”

Three thumps hit the door one after the other, followed closely by the sound of shattering glass.

I shrugged. “Guess they don’t think so.” Crap. This whole night was a bust.

We got into the truck but before we could decide what to do next, Dan had a phone call. After he hung up, he said, “That was Ramirez. There’s been a possible burglary.”

“What? There are so few vamps cruising that we’ve been reduced to checking out burglaries?”

“It’s your parent’s store. There’s been a break-in.”

Try Me

Chapter Seventeen



Fear thrilled through me. “Was anyone hurt?” I demanded.

Dan shook his head and started the truck. “No one was there. But the fire alarm went off.” He peeled off onto the road.

“Fire? There was fire?”

“I don’t know. Calm down, Val. You’ll see for yourself in a few minutes.”

A few minutes? It felt like hours of worry and fear until we finally got to Astral Reflections. I barely waited for the truck to stop until I was out the door. Everything looked okay on the outside of the old two-story wooden building, and the fire trucks were just pulling away. Mom stood in the doorway watching them leave, hugging herself and looking shell-shocked and angry.

I came to a stop in front of her, not sure whether to hug her or not. So I stood there, feeling awkward. “What happened?”

Wordlessly, she stepped aside and gestured inside at the store. I gasped. It was totally trashed. Shelves were tipped over and books were strewn everywhere, with ripped pages scattered across the mess. Candles were broken, and delicate figurines that used to depict fairy, unicorn, and other fantasy creatures were smashed and lay in glittering shards everywhere. Rick stood in the middle of it, looking around helplessly as if he didn’t know what to do or where to start.

“Careful,” I told Fang. I didn’t want him to hurt his paws on the broken pieces.

The terrier stopped at the door. P’LL WAIT OUTSIDE. YOU DON’T NEED MY HELP HERE.

Dan appeared at the door and took the situation in at a glance. “Have you called the police?”

Rick shook his head. “Just the SCU.”

“Why the Special Crimes Unit?” Dan asked. “Do you think this was done by a vampire?”

“Maybe.” Rick nodded at the counter. “See for yourself.”

Dan and I crunched our way over to the counter, trying to avoid as many shards as possible. There, scrawled on the counter in large red block letters, it said, “Suffer the consequences, Slayer.”

All the blood rushed from my head. Light-headed, I reached out to steady myself on the counter. “Is that blood?”

Dan leaned over and sniffed. “No, just a large marker of some kind.”

“They attacked my *family*,” I said incredulously.

“Indirectly,” Dan said soothingly. “It doesn’t look like anyone’s hurt.”

Not physically, maybe, but Mom and Rick both looked totally devastated. This store was their life. I turned a remorseful expression to Rick. “I’m so sorry—”

Rick enveloped me in a hug. “Not your fault, sweetheart.”

Mom didn’t say anything. What did her silence mean? That it was all my fault, that if it weren’t for me, the store they loved wouldn’t look like the “after” scene from a tornado? Unfortunately, it might be true. If I had backed down when I got the first note, this wouldn’t have happened.

Rick squeezed me once more then released me. “We’ll be okay. We have insurance.”

But he didn’t mention the fact that they’d also lose money while the store was closed for clean-up. And the height of the shopping season was coming up soon. “Can you open again after Thanksgiving?” It was only a couple of days away . . . and I still hadn’t invited Shade yet. Guess I needed to do that soon.

“Sure, sure. Between your mother, me, Jen, and Joshua, we should get ready in no time. Besides, they didn’t touch the new merchandise in the back that just came in. We’ll be fine.”

He started to pull out a chair, but Dan said, “Please try not to touch anything else. The SCU forensics unit should be here soon to see what they can find.”

We exited just as the team drove up. The leader, a no-nonsense older woman with the name “Mahoney” embroidered on her police jacket, took charge. “What happened here?” she asked Dan.

“Looks like vandalism targeted at a member of the SCU, or possibly burglary.” He nodded at Mom and Rick. “These are the Andersons, the owners of the store.”

Mahoney nodded and gave swift instructions to her crew. As they headed in, she asked, “Is anything missing?”

Rick put an arm around Mom and spoke for both of them. “Not that we know of, but we haven’t had a chance to look at everything.”

She nodded. “Why the SCU? You suspect something out of the ordinary?”

Dan explained my involvement and the message scrawled on the counter. Mahoney looked thoughtful. “It’s two o’clock in the morning. How did you know this happened?”

“The fire alarm went off, and the fire department notified us,” Rick said. “But there was no fire—the vandal must have pulled the fire alarm himself.”

Mahoney took a moment to tell her team to check the alarm for fingerprints, then asked, “Any idea how he got in?”

Rick’s mouth twisted in a grimace. “The back door was broken in. He must have come in that way.”

The policewoman glanced inside. “Your store is open to the public, so fingerprints may not tell us much. And given the nature of your merchandise, it wouldn’t be unusual to find signs of nonhumans about. Our best bet is the door they broke into and the fire alarm itself. Any idea who did it?”

Dan shrugged. “We’ll work the angle of who has a grudge against Val.”

Unfortunately, that list was rather long. Damn it, I should have stopped when I got the first warning. I had no idea they’d come after my family.

Fang leaned up against me. IT’S NOT YOUR FAULT, VAL. IT’S THE FAULT OF THE LOW LIFE WHO DID THIS.

I squatted down to give him a hug. *Thanks, but if it hadn’t been for me, this never would have happened.*

YOU KNOW BETTER THAN THAT, Fang said with a nudge. I’M GONNA CHECK THE SMELLS AROUND BACK.

As he trotted off, Dan drew me away from where Mahoney was talking to Mom and Rick. “Rick’s right. It’s not your fault.”

I blinked back sudden tears. Anger and disgust were a lot easier to take than unexpected kindness. “That’s what Fang said, too.” But I wasn’t sure I believed it.

“Do you think they were looking for the books here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“So what are you going to do?”

I rubbed my temples, trying to ease the sudden throbbing headache this whole situation had given me. “I don’t know.” If I did nothing, more people could be injured . . . and by more than the thief. If we didn’t find the culprit soon, the unresolved tension between the vamps and demons could escalate into a war. And if I continued trying to find the culprit, my family would be in more danger—the thief had proven he knew right where to hurt me. “It’s a no-win situation.”

“Okay, what do you *want* to do? Give up?”

The thought of doing that sent rage sweeping through me. “Hell, no. I want to catch the rat bastard who did this and hang him up by his *cojones*.”

Dan winced at the thought. “Why don’t you leave me to do the investigating?”

“And I should do what? Take up knitting?” Maybe Fang would like a nice knitted sweater and cap for the upcoming winter.

MAYBE NOT, Fang said with disgust as he came trotting up.

Just kidding, I assured him. I didn’t think I could sit still that long. “Find anything back there?” I asked aloud.

NOPE. TOO MANY FEET MUDDIED THE SCENTS. THE PLACE STINKS OF THE BOOTIES THOSE SO-CALLED FORENSIC DUDES WEAR.

Well, they probably didn’t have a forensic test for scents. At Dan’s questioning look, I shook my head. “He didn’t find anything.”

“I’m not suggesting you take up knitting,” Dan said. “But take some time off. You probably need it after everything that’s happened lately. I’ll talk to Ramirez, but I know he’ll agree.”

“And what about you? What if this psycho starts targeting you and your family? Like Gwen?”

“All the more reason you should stay home, so you can protect her.”

“Are you suggesting we set ourselves up as bait?”

He looked taken aback. “No, that’s not what I meant at all.”

“Good.” I wasn’t worried about myself, but Gwen was another matter entirely. The thought of putting another friend in danger made me feel helpless and angry. I sighed. He was right. Staying home and twiddling my thumbs was probably the best thing for everyone. “Okay, I’ll do it.” I just hoped we’d find the culprit soon, or I wouldn’t be able to vouch for my sanity.

I glared at Fang. *And no comments from you.*

He gazed at the sky, trying to look innocent. NOTHING HERE. NOPE, NOT A WORD.

“Good,” Dan said, looking relieved. “I’ll come by tomorrow, check to see how you’re doing.”

“Why are you being so helpful?”

He shrugged. “Because until this is resolved, you and Gwen are in danger. And I want to prove to your friends that I didn’t take the books.”

Good enough. “Okay. Shall we go?”

He nodded and I headed back toward Mom and Rick. Mom was leaning against her husband, their arms around each others’ waists and her head on his shoulder as they gazed at the destruction.

“Rick?” I asked gently. “Is there anything we can do?”

“No.” He smiled wearily. “We’ll start cleaning tomorrow, after they’re done.”

“Do you need some help?” After all, I wasn’t doing anything.

Mom’s expression hardened. “No. Just catch the bastards who did this.”

Strange how such harsh words could soften my heart. Mom didn’t blame me, didn’t accuse me of doing it myself. Instead, she trusted me to find the people who had and punish them. “We will,” I promised her.

As Mom turned back to stare into the devastation, Rick pulled me aside and led me to their car. “I was going to call you tomorrow. I’ve had someone looking into your genealogy, to find out whatever he could about your background.” He opened the trunk and pulled out a small box full of papers. “This is what he found.” As I took it gingerly, he added, “I didn’t tell him we were looking for demons, but asked him to trace your ancestry back several generations and note anything odd that came up about them.”

Wow. “I-I don’t know what to say.” Here I’d thought he’d forgotten to ask Mom about her background and instead, he’d gone out and gotten as much information as possible.

“You don’t need to say anything. Consider it a Thanksgiving present. I just hope you find what you’re looking for in there.”

“Thanks, Rick.” I gave him a hug and carried the box carefully back to the truck. Maybe this would help me figure out what other kind of demon blood ran in my veins. If nothing else, it would keep me occupied for awhile.

Dan dropped us off at the condo and I tried to be quiet, but it wasn’t necessary. Gwen was at work and Shade was sitting on the couch in jeans and a T-shirt watching television in the dark. Princess was lying in his lap and his bare feet were propped up on the coffee table. Wow. The guy had no clue how gorgeous he was. Heck, even his feet were long, elegant, and pretty.

I glanced around. No one else was there. “Hi,” I said cautiously when he turned to look at me. “Where’s your babysitter?”

“All gone. We cleared the last of them. No thief.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Bored. But I feel fine.”

“No more blitzing in and out?”

“Very rarely. Princess seems to help.” He petted her silky ears.

Oh, yeah. I just now realized I could see his expression. “She keeps you grounded, too, huh?”

He nodded and Princess glanced in my direction. I AM GOOD FOR MY HUMAN.

“I’m sure you are,” I said, suppressing a smile.

Fang jumped up on the couch to touch noses with her. They shared some private communication then jumped off the couch and disappeared outside together. I shook my head. “Now there’s a match made in someone’s demented mind.”

“Like us?” Shade asked softly.

Oh, crap. I felt my face heat. “Not what I meant,” I mumbled.

“I know. But I think we should talk.” He patted the cushion on the couch next to him. “Come, sit.”

Emotions roiled within me. I really wanted to get to know Shade, but I was still so uncertain about everything. I needed to escape to my room until I knew myself better and exactly how I felt, but I had promised to talk to him. And maybe this would be a good time to take Dan’s advice, too.

I carefully set the box Rick had given me on the coffee table and sat down next to Shade, perching on the edge of the cushions. He placed his hand on my mind and I saw incredible sadness, longing, and regret in his expression. Pain twinged through me—I’d put that there. Lola was pretty satisfied from her recent feeding, so she wasn’t as greedy as normal. Maybe I could get close without fighting my nature. I scooted back, toed off my shoes, and propped my feet up on the table, too. This way I wouldn’t have to see his heartache, coward that I was.

He clicked off the television and twined his fingers with mine. I let him. It felt so nice, so normal. Like a real dating couple hanging out together. And why not? We might both be part demon, but a good chunk of us was still human. At least, I knew seven-eighths of me was. I wasn’t sure about Shade.

Maybe if I eased into this discussion, it wouldn’t feel so difficult. Especially in the dark. A lot of things could be said in the dark that couldn’t be revealed in the bright light. Leaning my head against his shoulder, I asked, “How much of you is demon and how much human?”

“Same as you,” he said quietly.

Another thing we had in common. “I’ve been wondering . . . what exactly is a shadow demon?” I’d never gotten around to looking it up in the encyclopedia.

He laid his head on top of mine and snuggled me closer. “A full shadow demon can exist in more than one dimension at a time and phase in and out of them at will.”

“And you?”

“I’m mostly human, so I stay in this dimension, but still have continuous contact with several others.”

“Hence the swirling ribbons of light,” I suggested.

“Yes, hence.”

“Can you see those other dimensions? Do they look like ours?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Not like ours, but I can’t describe it. I don’t see them so much as I sense them. I exist in the shadows, sort of insubstantial. I can’t interact with anything but the energy.”

“What does a shadow demon *do*?” That part wasn’t clear to me at all.

“We act as a conduit, to allow the energy to cross the boundaries of the dimensions. You remember how I pulled energy to heal Dan from one of them?” At my nod, he added, “That’s what I do.”

“So, there are other kinds of energy?”

“Yes. Many kinds.”

His voice sounded final, discouraging me to ask more questions. But when had that stopped me before? “Like what?”

After a long pause, he said, “I’d rather not discuss it.”

“Bad?”

“Yes, some are very bad.”

And that proved what kind of a guy he was, that he hadn’t allowed himself to use any of that, only the good energy. At least, that was all I’d seen him use. “What about this world’s energy? Do you take some from here and send it to the other dimensions?”

“Every time I take energy from somewhere else, I exchange it for some here, to keep them in balance.”

That made sense. “What kind of energy? And what does our energy do for them?”

“This world is very solid, or at least that’s how it seems to me. I exchange that stability for things in the other places that we need.”

“What if—”

“Please, Val, I’d rather talk about us, about what’s going on between us.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “But you’re fascinating, you know?”

He kissed the top of my head. “You, too. But I’d like to know how you feel about me, about what Micah wants me to help you with. Is it . . . repulsive to you?”

“No, of course not.” Hating that I’d put that uncertainty in his voice, I hugged him then flipped one of my legs over his so I could straddle his lap. Claspng his face between my hands, I said, “How can you think that? Couldn’t you tell how much I enjoyed what we did the other day?”

He looked baffled and still a little hurt. “I thought so, but you’ve been avoiding me . . .”

And he looked so lost with those big sad puppy dog eyes, I couldn't resist kissing him. I tried to press my mouth to his, but I was still new at this, so I ended up smooshing our noses together. "Oops." Oh, yeah, what a seductress.

"Try again," Shade murmured.

He tilted his head one way, I tilted the other, and we fit together perfectly. I intended to give him just a short kiss and pull away, but Shade put his arms around me and I melted into him. The kiss went on and on, and when I tried to pull away for a breath of air, he slipped his tongue inside my mouth.

Oh, yeah. Now Lola was perking up and percolating in all the right places. But I didn't want this to be about Lola. I wanted it to be about me, the human me. Shade's hands roamed my back and we explored each other's mouths for a while until I felt too shaky to go on.

Pulling away, I collapsed next to him and tried to still my frantically beating heart as well as Lola's raging hormones. Oh, my. "Did that feel like I was repulsed by you?"

"No . . ." Shade pushed me gently down on the couch and pulled me into his arms until we were lying entwined together like one huge knotty being. I hoped he couldn't hear the fast thud-thud-thud of my heart against his chest. I didn't want to come across like some huge, inexperienced doofus or something. But this felt so special, so very right. I wanted to lie with him here forever, just like this.

"Okay, if you weren't disgusted, why were you avoiding me?"

I sighed. Truth time. And it was a little easier now that my head was lying on his chest and I couldn't see his face. "I'm still trying to understand what it means to be part lust demon, Shade. It's like my body is all gung-ho about experiencing all the lusty pleasures of life, but my mind and emotions haven't quite caught up yet."

"You mean you're not ready yet to uh . . . do the full Monty?"

I chuckled but nodded into his shirt, feeling embarrassed just talking about it.

He squeezed me tight. "That's okay, love. I don't expect you to."

Oh, wow. This was so totally stupid, but when he called me *Love*, I about melted into a big puddle of goo. Thank heavens Fang wasn't here to laugh at me. "You don't?"

"No. I know you're not ready yet. Losing your virginity is huge for a lust demon."

I sighed. He did understand. "Yeah."

"Of course, I don't really like waiting," he teased. "But I will. You're worth it."

Oh, my. Every time Shade opened his mouth, he made me feel even more special. Was this the perfect guy or what? But I didn't get it. Here was this totally hot guy who was nice, sweet, understanding . . . and could have any girl he wanted. Why me?

I didn't realize I'd said that last part aloud until Shade responded. "Why not you? You're strong, passionate, loyal . . . and really, really cute."

I wrinkled my nose. Cute. I'd never expected to be called that.

"Besides," he added in a softer tone, "you see me. Not the shadow demon, not the freak with the whirling interdimensional energy occupying his skin. You see *me*."

Oh. I felt all proud of myself, yet embarrassed that I felt that pride. "Well, you're something special," I assured him. And I knew quite well what it felt like to be treated like a freak. Speaking of which . . . "Uh, that reminds me. I kinda mentioned you to my mom."

"You did?" For some reason, that made a huge grin split his face.

"Yeah, and she wants me to invite you to Thanksgiving dinner."

He turned all still and quiet. "And you don't want to?"

"Of course I want to. It's just that . . . I'm not sure how they'll treat you. It might not be a great holiday."

He relaxed. "I know your family is important to you, and I'd like to meet them. Don't worry about me. I'm used to dealing with people's reactions to my weirdness."

I sighed—might as well face the inevitable. "Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"I won't." He paused and ran a finger down the side of my face. "So you won't mind me helping you with your . . . with Lola?"

"No . . . but for now, can it just be you and me? She doesn't need you right now, but I do."

"Of course." He lifted my chin with his finger to bring my mouth to his.

We kissed softly and I lay my head back down on his chest as we snuggled. This was so nice, so peaceful. I resolved to relax and enjoy it while I could. Soon enough, we'd be back to hunting thieves, staking vampires, and soothing angry demons.

Try Me

Chapter Eighteen



I woke in Shade's arms sometime late the next morning when Fang poked me in the side. GET UP, SLEEPYHEAD. TIME TO FEED YOUR FAITHFUL HELLHOUND.

I AM HUNGRY, TOO, Princess added. NOT DOG FOOD. I WANT GWEN FOOD.

"All right, all right." I disentangled myself from Shade and got up stiffly. It had felt nice lying in his arms all night, but the uncomfortable couch was no substitute for my own bed. Groaning, I staggered to the kitchen as Shade turned over and threw his arm up over his head.

I opened the refrigerator and surveyed my options. Hellhounds could eat anything without repercussions, but they preferred protein. Since bacon and eggs were something I knew how to cook, I put them on the stove. I was nowhere near as good a cook as Gwen, but at least it was edible, and the two hellhounds didn't complain.

The smell of bacon cooking woke Shade, and he joined us for breakfast. It was strange watching him eat. His food disappeared into the constantly moving boundaries of his face, but it was impossible to make out where his mouth was. I wondered if all the food he ate ended up in this dimension, or if some ended up somewhere else. If it ended up elsewhere, did that mean it was exchanged for food there? Ew. Ick. Didn't even want to think about that.

Neither of us were morning people, so we ate in silence for awhile until Shade said, "I haven't been to my place in awhile. I should probably go home now that I'm feeling better and we don't need to test anyone else." He stretched. "It'll be nice to sleep in a real bed again, too."

I nodded. I could understand his wanting to go home. And too much togetherness could be a bad thing. I didn't want us to get on each other's nerves before we'd even started a relationship. At least I hoped that's what this was.

He stopped eating for a moment. "Are you working tonight?"

“No.” Realizing he didn’t know what had happened the night before, I told him about the store, the warning messages, and Dan’s suggestion to take some time off.

“Then would you like to do something together?”

Absurdly pleased by the thought of a real date, I said, “Sure. But can you . . .” I gestured at his general swirliness, which would make it difficult to appear in public.

“Not easily. But I thought we could go to my place or stay here, rent a movie, and order in.”

I smiled shyly. “Sounds good. Why don’t you come back here? I’d like you to be near Gwen when she’s home, just in case.”

“Cool.” He rose and took the dishes to the sink, and even rinsed them off and put them in the dishwasher. He was well trained, too. “Where’s your cell?”

I pulled it out of my pocket. “Here. Why?”

He took it from me. “To program in my number.” He pushed some buttons then handed it back to me. When our hands touched, I saw a smile flash across his face. “In case you need to call me.”

Did it make me a total dork that I thought that was incredibly cool and sweet, a real boyfriend-like thing to do?

He kissed me on the cheek. “See you later.”

The two hellhounds, who had been dozing under the table after their meal, raised their heads. I WANT TO BRING FANG WITH US, Princess said. SHOW HIM MY HOME.

I glanced at Fang. “It’s up to you. We won’t be working today, so you’re free to do whatever you want.”

I GUESS I’LL DO WHAT PRINCESS WANTS, THEN.

He didn’t sound all that thrilled, but the alternative was hanging out around here, waiting for trouble to come to us. Not exactly exciting. “Can you get them both on your Ducati?” I asked Shade.

“Actually, Micah took my bike home and brought back my car, so it should be no problem.”

“Okay, good.” Though it seemed strange that I didn’t even know where he lived or what kind of car he drove.

The rest of the morning, I spent more time than I would like to admit daydreaming about Shade, but that wasn’t productive, so I decided to get something done.

It took hours to read through everything Rick had given me on my ancestors. On my mother’s side, I didn’t find anything out of the ordinary at all. My father’s side was a different matter. There wasn’t a lot, mostly birth and death certificates, along with a family tree and some newspaper clippings, including obituaries.

Weird. The Shapiro lust demons didn’t reproduce much. My great-grandfather was the full incubus demon in my family. He died at an unspecified age, estimated at twenty-five, and was killed by a jealous husband whose wife he had

seduced. The obituary suggested he was a philanderer and the world was better off without him. His origins were unknown, and he didn't have any known family except for his only child, my grandfather.

My grandfather wasn't quite as bad, being only half incubus, but he was no saint either. He was widely known as a Casanova with the ability to charm any woman into bed. He died at the age of twenty-seven, killed by the father of a girl he seduced. He also had only one child—my father. And my father, of course, died at the age of twenty-three, having killed himself. He had only one child—me. No one commented on their unusual strength, speed, or healing powers, and the women in that line were totally normal except for carrying the offspring of incubi.

Confused, I set the papers down. Could I have more than one child? Did I want one at all? More importantly, should I try? I was too young to think about it yet, but I might want children some day. Having a child who was only one-sixteenth incubus or succubus didn't seem too awful, but what if I ended up marrying someone like Shade? What would happen if two different kind of demon genes mixed? A shadow lust demon? I wouldn't want to inflict that on any kid. Better look into birth control, fast.

Then again, would I even live long enough to have a kid? Life expectancy wasn't very long in the Shapiro demon line . . . Was this a curse of the Shapiros? To die an early death because of the demon inside them?

No. I wouldn't accept that. If my demon side was almost too strong for me to handle, imagine that doubled, quadrupled . . . No wonder my ancestors succumbed to the incubus within. Their deaths were a natural consequence of their inability to keep the demon zipped inside. Besides, hadn't Micah's father lived into his forties? Micah had never said what he died of.

Gwen said I could use her computer whenever I wanted, so I checked out the Internet. Lucas Blackburn's obituary said he'd died in a car accident at the age of forty-seven. Nothing supernatural about the drunk driver who'd killed him, and I couldn't find any mention of anything peculiar about Lucas anywhere else on the Internet. He knew how to keep his demon under wraps and had taught Micah to do the same. Maybe I *should* listen to Micah's advice.

Sighing, I pushed away from the computer. Another dead end. Frustration seemed to be the rule in my life lately. Frustrated in finding out where my extra abilities came from, frustrated in finding the books or the thief who stole them, and frustrated in . . . well, let's just say Shade had a lot to do with that last one.

My phone rang. Thank goodness—something to do. I answered it. It was Dan, checking on us, as promised. From the sound of the noise in the background, he was at the hospital. Since he didn't sound stressed, I assumed he was visiting Nicole again. I felt only a small pang of regret. Dan was better off with someone fully human, like himself. "Everything's fine here," I assured him. We discussed the possibilities for a few minutes and Dan asked, "You're sure this Andrew kid isn't the thief?"

"I'd like him to be, but Fang cleared him. It has to be someone else."

"Maybe."

"Hey, did the SCU forensics people find anything at the store?"

“No. Too many members of the general public had passed through there, and there were no prints on the fire alarm.”

Well, crap. “Okay, thanks. I’ll let you go.” I couldn’t help but rib him a little. “Tell Nicole I hope she’s doing better.”

“I, uh . . . oh, okay.”

He sounded embarrassed and a little guilty for spending time with her. Well, I wasn’t above feeling a little pleasure at his guilt. Grinning, I hung up.

Now what? I didn’t have to stick around to wait for Dan anymore, and I wasn’t sure what time Gwen would be home. I surfed the ’net awhile, shopping for stuff to go in my room and spending way too much money. So I was really glad when the doorbell rang, hoping whoever was there would provide a cure for my boredom.

Mood was there, her eyes glowing purple with distress as she supported Josh with one arm around his waist and the other holding his arm around her neck. His head lolled, and at first I thought he was drunk . . . until I saw the scrapes, cuts, and bruises all over him. “We need Shade,” she said, sounding as upset as she looked.

I helped her half-walk, half-carry Josh to the couch. He collapsed there and groaned.

I knelt beside him. “What happened, Josh? Who did this?” Had the thief targeted another demon?

“Fault of . . . vamps,” Josh muttered.

Oh, crap. “Do you know which ones?” I pressed.

But the effort must have been too much, for Josh passed out. Mood looked stricken. “Someone beat him up yesterday. It’s really bad, and he won’t go to the hospital. I’m afraid he’s going to die.” Her voice broke and the tears came, pouring silently down her face. She stared around the room. “Where’s Shade? He has to heal Josh.”

“He’s not here, but I’ll call him.” This wasn’t exactly what I pictured using his phone number for, but it was an emergency.

When he answered, I said, “Shade, can you come now? Josh is hurt bad and needs your help”

“I’m on my way.”

Tears stained Mood’s face, making her black and purple eye makeup blotch and run. “It’s okay,” I assured her. “Shade will be here soon.”

He must not live far away, because he knocked on the door within fifteen minutes. I let him and the two hellhounds in. Fang and Princess slipped out the back, Fang muttering something about being in the way and finding some squirrels to chase.

I pointed wordlessly to the couch. Josh had regained consciousness, and though he couldn’t—or wouldn’t—tell us who had done this to him, he did open up enough to tell Shade where it hurt.

"I'm afraid there may be some internal damage," Shade said. "I can heal him, but it'll hurt quite a bit, Josh."

"Can't . . . hurt more . . . than it does . . . now," Josh gasped out.

"Okay. I'll need someone to use as a template, so the healing energies know how a healthy body operates."

"Me," Mood said immediately. "Use me."

"Are you sure?" Shade asked. "I'm only the conduit for the energy, but when you act as the template, you two will share a lot more than energy—thoughts, history, emotion. Are you ready to reveal everything about yourselves to each other?"

Mood turned even paler and glanced guiltily at Josh. I understood that look. The poor girl had a huge crush on him, and he wasn't even aware of it. "I can do it," I said softly. "I've done it before." It wasn't fun, but at least I didn't have any secrets to keep from the guy.

Josh recoiled, then grimaced at the pain. "No. Mood, please?"

She stroked the hair back from his forehead. "Of course, Josh. I'll do this for you."

Guess he didn't want to know the depths of the Slayer's heart. I couldn't blame him and, to tell the truth, it didn't hurt even a little to be unwanted. I just felt relieved that Mood was the one who would share everything with him.

Shade had Mood sit in a chair next to the couch and he knelt between them. "I'm going to place my hand on the back of your neck," he told them. "Are you ready?"

They both nodded. "Try to stay conscious and endure it as long as you can," Shade told Josh, then slipped his hands inside their collars to touch bare skin. He blipped into focus and I could tell when he started because Mood and Josh both stiffened. Josh's body bowed in agony and his mouth opened in a soundless scream. Mood looked stunned, apprehensive, and disbelieving all at once.

It was too painful to watch them, so I turned my attention to Shade instead. The last time he'd done this, *I* was the template and hadn't really noticed what was going on with the conduit. Once every second or more, Shade flipped to swirls, and harsh flickers of violet lightning pulsed through him, flashing from Mood to Josh. That must be the otherworldly healing energy he was using, but it looked like a raging storm inside the shadow demon.

Shade had told Dan and me it didn't hurt him, but the way he grimaced, his teeth bared and his head thrown back, it sure didn't look like a walk in the park. Then again, maybe it wasn't pain. Maybe he was just concentrating really hard.

I remember the whole process had seemed to take hours, but this only took a few long, agonizing minutes as Josh's wounds, cuts, and scrapes visibly healed. Shade released him abruptly. Josh fell back, passed out, but looked a hundred times better than he had before.

Mood put her hands over her face and burst into tears.

"It's okay," Shade told her tightly. "He's healed now."

Feeling I needed to do something, I said, “If you want to talk . . .”

But Mood just shook her head, then ran out the door, slamming it behind her.

Whoa. “I guess she learned exactly how Josh feels about her.”

Shade stood up and slipped his hood up over his head. “He lost his girlfriend not too long ago. Hasn’t gotten over her yet.”

His voice sounded strained. “Are you okay?”

“Fine.” But when he turned to walk, he staggered a little and caught himself on the couch.

“Yeah, right.”

I hurried around the couch and tried to help him, but he jerked his arm away. “Don’t touch me.”

I backed away, palms out. “Whoa, dude. Just trying to help.”

“I know.” He bent his head and crossed his arms across his chest. “I’m . . . not stable right now.”

What did that mean? I didn’t remember this happening last time. Then again, he’d left pretty fast after he’d healed Dan, and I was far more concerned about other things then. “You don’t look like you can walk, let alone drive. Why don’t you lie down in my room?”

“Okay.”

He stumbled toward my room and I went before him to clear his path and open the door. Though I was careful not to touch him, I couldn’t help but wonder what the heck was going on. Once Shade was horizontal, and lying on his back, I closed the door and stepped toward the bed. “What can I do to help?”

“Nothing.”

Well, that sounded final, not to mention rude. Now I was confused. After all, we were supposed to go on our first real date tonight, and this didn’t seem like the Shade I knew at all. Then again, how much did I really know about the shadow demon? I thought for a minute, wondering what to do.

I should grant him his secrets.

I should respect his privacy.

I should leave him alone.

To hell with *shoulds*. I wanted answers.

Try Me

Chapter Nineteen



I plopped down on the floor next to the bed. “I think I deserve an explanation.”

“Go away, Val,” he said, his voice sounding tight, like he’d gritted the words through his teeth.

I wished I could see his face, but it whirled with dark energy swirls. Strange. They were moving a lot faster than normal, and seemed shot through with virulent purple. “Not gonna happen. You helped me with Lola. The least I can do is help you with this.” Whatever “this” was.

From the way my comforter bunched up under his fist, it looked like he was gripping it with all his might. I closed my hand over his fist and he popped back into focus, his face contorted into a snarling mask of demonic rage. I reared back for a moment, finally noticing the long, sharp blade in his other hand, pointed toward his own neck. What the—

I wrestled the knife away from him and tossed it into the corner, then clamped down on his fist again. I realized the rage wasn’t directed at me. In fact, it looked like Shade was battling hard against something internal. Or against something in another dimension, maybe?

He tried to throw off my hand, but I wouldn’t let him. Without letting go, I got up on the bed next to him. “Shade, what’s happening? Talk to me.” This was beginning to scare me.

He whipped his head away from me, trying to hide his raging agony in my pillow. With my other hand, I cupped his cheek, hoping to reassure him.

“Don’t!” He sat up abruptly and shoved me off him, off the bed, and onto the floor. I could hear him breathing hard as he turned away from me and curled into a fetal position.

Stunned, I sat there for a moment on my aching butt. What the hell was going on? Whatever it was, I was pretty sure Shade wasn’t in control of himself right now. Was this the shadow side of his demon? I could sympathize. When Lola took control of me, I wasn’t always responsible for my actions either.

Speaking of Lola, maybe she could help him. Heck, she ought to be good for something. I got up and sat down gently on the bed, trying not to touch him and set him off again. Reaching down deep inside, I encouraged Lola to come out and play. She really liked Shade, so this should be a no-brainer.

My lusty demon was a little reluctant after we'd been thrown on our butt, but I ignored Shade's body language and reminded myself—and her—that he wasn't usually like this. He was usually nice, friendly, and, when he wasn't all swirly, hot enough to light anyone's fuse.

Oh, yeah. That did it. Lola reached out tentatively toward Shade. Whatever he was fighting, it didn't matter. He was still male, still helpless against Lola's lure. Thin tendrils of lust and need slipped in through him and slid up his spinal column, caressing his chakras along the way. I sent more wisps of energy to wind through his core, radiating out and down, touching all those sensitive, secret male spots and bringing them to his attention. I left him that way for a few moments, not wanting to do more that would force him to do my bidding.

"Val," he croaked in a warning tone.

"Shhh. Let me help you." I reached out to massage his shoulders. Boy, were they tense. "Relax. Just enjoy the sensations."

He let go of a tiny fraction of his tension, but he still wasn't feeling enough desire for Lola. Encouraged, I spooned against his back with my arm around his waist, hoping the touch of my body would finish what Lola had started. Oddly enough, instead of drawing energy from him, I was able to send energy into his body, stoking his pleasure centers with my reserves, stroking his nerve endings with a feather-light touch, helping him to feel human again.

Whoa. I didn't know I could do that. But it was sure nice to know I could give as well as receive.

He relaxed some more and unbent from his fetal position. Encouraged, I snuggled closer and let my hand wander up his chest, down his side to his hip and his outer thigh. He sighed in pleasure, and I let my hand move to the inside of his leg, the denim feeling rough against my fingertips. I squeezed his thigh and Shade rolled onto his back. "What are you doing?" he asked softly.

Ah, good. The strain was gone from his voice. Lola wanted me to let my fingers do a little more walking, but I wasn't bold enough to do that yet. I did want to see his face, though, so I pulled his T-shirt up and laid my palm flat on his warm stomach then gazed into his eyes. Pain resided there, along with shame and another emotion I couldn't name. "I'm trying to make you feel better," I said.

He sighed and closed his eyes. "It's working."

"Good," I whispered, then straddled his hips to run both of my hands up his bare chest, loving the hardness, the muscles, the ticklish feel of his chest hair. Very male. His lips parted as he watched me beneath hooded eyes, one lock of blond hair curled across his forehead. He was so gorgeous, so beautiful. I couldn't believe he was here. With me. Like this.

He reached out and clasped my hips, then raised his hands to lift my shirt up and over my head. He did it so fast, he caught me off guard. I froze for a moment, then realized that was all he planned to do for the moment. He clasped my bare waist, smiling as he gazed at me with a covetous look in his eye that Lola liked . . . a lot.

My body heated under his gaze and I fought the urge to cover my chest with my hands. True, I was still covered by a bra, but it was plain white cotton. Not exactly the sort of thing you wanted a guy to see the first time he saw you naked. I'd planned on something lacier and a lot prettier for our date, but hadn't had time to change.

"Beautiful," he murmured.

Embarrassed in the bright light, I slid down onto the bed and laid on my side. Shade sat up, shucked his hoodie, then pulled his T-shirt off over his head. He lay next to me and cradled me in his arms, bare belly to warm bare belly.

"This feels nice," he said as he hugged me and rested his forehead against mine.

Since he didn't seem inclined to do anything else, I wondered if he was still fighting . . . whatever. "Are you okay now?" I asked.

"I'm good."

I ran my hand down his smooth back, loving the feel of his chest against mine. I let Lola subside, since he seemed to be in control now. "What happened there, Shade?"

He stayed silent for a moment, then asked, "You sure you want to know?"

"Of course. I showed you my demon. Time for you to show me yours."

He chuckled at that then sighed. "I did."

"I know, and I want to understand it." Shade was so sweet, I wanted to help him any way I could. "You're not *just* a conduit for the other dimension's energies, are you?"

"Yes and no."

"Well, that helped. Not. Come on, share."

"I am a conduit . . . but I don't let all the energies through."

He stopped there and left me hanging. Sheesh, this was like pulling teeth. "I know you let through the healing energies, so what kind do you *not* let through? Bad ones?"

"You could say that."

"Come on, Shade. Spill."

He sighed. "Micah is the only other one who knows this. He's usually there for me, after the healing. But I didn't think about calling him when you called. I just came running."

This reluctance to talk was making me impatient, but I could tell this was difficult for him, and very important. “I won’t mention it to another soul.”

“I know.” He squeezed me harder for a moment. “Okay. Shadow demons create a conduit between two dimensions. When I pull in healing energy from the other side, I send back other energy.”

“You mentioned that before,” I said encouragingly.

He nodded. “When it’s going back and forth, it’s not a problem. But once I stop . . .” He paused to take a deep breath. “Other . . . things . . . feel the disturbance and try to cross into this world. Through me. Your energy helped me stop them.”

“*Things?* Like what?”

“Bad things. Bad . . . demons.”

“*Demons* try to cross through you, through your body?”

He shuddered and nodded.

I had a sudden vision of Shade’s body erupting with pustulant sores that became writhing monsters that grew from his body and fell off. That couldn’t be right. “I assume we’re talking full demons here. How is that possible?”

“As a conduit, I could channel their essence. Once it arrives here, they would take the form of one of the native species—humans, dogs, other animals.”

“No wonder they were able to interbreed with us.”

“Yes. Where do you think demons came from in the first place?”

“I never gave it any thought.” But I did now. Good grief. It made sense. Demons weren’t native to this dimension so they had to come from somewhere . . .

“Thank you,” I said suddenly.

“For what?”

“For not letting any more through.” A whole army of full-blooded demons? I shuddered. I didn’t want to think about it.

“You’re welcome.” But there was an odd tone in his voice.

“There’s more, isn’t there?”

He sighed. “Yes. Did you ever wonder why you haven’t seen more full demons?”

“Never thought about it.” But now that I had, I was really glad I hadn’t. Vampires were bad enough, but at least they’d been human once. Demons, not so much. “Why?”

“Because the last time they came through was in 1929. All you see now is their great-grandchildren, like us. That’s why most of us have one-eighth demon blood. Unless we mate with another partial demon of the same type, the strain diminishes over time.”

“1929? You mean the stock market crash, the depression . . . ?”

He nodded. “Caused in great part by creatures from another dimension. They see our world as a place to propagate freely in a safe environment. They can’t help trying to destroy it at the same time. It’s in their nature.”

Stunned, I pulled away to stare at him. “You said the ‘last time’ they came through. I take it they’ve made it through before?”

“Yes, and each time with devastating effects on our world. That’s why stories of demons go back throughout history.”

“Why haven’t we seen more of them? Not that I’m complaining, mind you.”

“Because it takes a shadow demon like me to let them through. And I’ll die before I’ll let that happen.”

Oh. “That’s why . . . the knife?”

“Yes.” He buried his face in my neck. “You see, though any full shadow demon can pass bodily through the dimensions, not every one can help their kind pass through the dimensions. Only a few special ones throughout history.” He paused, then added, “Like my great-grandfather and everyone descended from him.”

That bit of news hit me like a slug in the gut. “Ohmigod, Shade, it’s not your fault,” I hurried to assure him. “You’re not responsible for the stupid things your great-grand-demon did.” When Shade remained silent and unmoving, I added, “Besides, if he hadn’t, neither of us would be alive today. Or people like Micah either.”

“I know.”

But he didn’t sound as if it made any difference in his self-blame. “Can they come through at other times?”

“Maybe. If I get too angry.” He gave me a wry grin. “You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.”

So that’s what Micah had meant. Images of a swirly green Hulk swam through my mind, but I dismissed them. To distract him, I asked, “So you know a lot about the different kinds of demons?”

“Some.”

“Do you, uh, think it’s possible that I have some other kind of demon in me?”

“No. Not possible. We can’t interbreed.”

No? Well, I guess that meant no shadowy lust demon rug rats were in the offing. Good to know. But I wondered why Micah didn’t know it when Shade did. And what could explain me and my unusual strength?

Before I could ask, Shade said, “I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Can we change the subject?”

“Okay,” I said reluctantly. I’d ask him later, when he wasn’t still shaken up by keeping back the demon horde. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Did you really offer to work for the Movement?”

Surprised, I pulled away for a moment. “Did Micah tell you that?”

“No, Fang told Princess.”

And Princess, of course, never met a secret she didn’t blab instantly. “Great spy she’d make,” I muttered.

He pulled me back. “At least someone told me about it. You didn’t really mean it, did you? You wouldn’t work for the vampires?”

He looked so concerned, I squirmed a little. “Yes, I gave my word.” But before he could say anything else, I added, “But only if another vamp gets poisoned or a demon tries to harm a vamp.”

“Tries to . . . or succeeds?”

I thought back to our conversation, trying to remember exactly what I’d said. “Uh, I said ‘tries to,’” I admitted, “but I’m sure he knows I meant if he succeeded.”

“I hope you’re right,” Shade said, but he looked like he doubted it. “They’re dangerous, love. Very dangerous. And I don’t care how civilized Alejandro seems, vampire nests have been known to chew up and spit out anyone who isn’t just like them.”

“I can take care of myself,” I assured him.

“Against one or two, sure. But against many, some of whom hold your future in their hands?”

He looked a lot more worried than the situation called for. Soothingly, I said, “Don’t worry. It won’t happen. We’ll find the thief, stop the bad guys, and all will be right with the world.” Seeing he still looked skeptical, I kissed him to take his mind off the subject. “Can we not talk about this any more?” I asked, echoing his earlier words.

He shook his head, but seemed willing to drop it. Then, wickedly, he said, “Well, since we’re both half naked and all . . . “

He kissed my neck and I dissolved into putty in his arms once again. Wow, that felt . . . awesome. Lola perked up again, glad it was time to play. Desire, warm and languid, played back and forth between Shade and me.

“Feed on me,” Shade whispered between soft kisses on the swell of my breasts. “Make me forget I’m a shadow demon.” He licked the curve of my breast along the line of my bra. “Take back the sustenance you gave me.”

Oh, my. Suddenly, it seemed like we were both wearing too many clothes, and I ached in places that had never felt a guy’s touch. I lost all control of Lola and she surged into him, wanting, needing, demanding. Lust curled between us, warm and thick as molasses, flowing back and forth and making me feel languid yet aching for a sensation I’d never experienced.

“Hold on a sec,” he whispered. Shade let go of me and slid off the bed to lock the door. He removed his shoes, socks, knife sheath, jeans, then his boxers. Though he stood there, obviously totally naked, I couldn’t see anything but his shadow demon swirls. They’d calmed down a lot but still obscured every part of his body, making him look like a hologram filled with eddying gray smoke. Oddly enough, the center of the swirls seemed concentrated right below his abdomen.

He reached out his hand and I gulped. Did I really want to see what was at the center? My face turned hot and I waffled mentally.

“It’s okay, Val,” he said softly. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Slowly, wondering what the heck I was doing, I extended my hand slowly until it touched his, bringing his body into sharp focus. This was the first fully nude man I’d ever seen, and I couldn’t help but gape. And I’d thought he was gorgeous before . . . Oh, my. Heat spread through me, and I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to see, but I didn’t. Not understanding the sensations rushing through me, I stood up and propelled myself into his arms so I wouldn’t have to look anymore. Sheesh, could I be any more idiotic?

“It’s all right,” Shade said, and I could hear the smile in his voice as he ran his hands down my back, soothing me. “No need to be embarrassed.”

Oh, God. He already knew I was a virgin, but he hadn’t known until now how very inept and dorky I could be. Embarrassed to see a naked man? Flushing with heat because I not only felt his desire for me through Lola’s link, but also against my bare stomach? How stupid could I be?

Plenty. Then again, I didn’t have to stay a virgin for long, did I? I eased off my jeans and kicked them aside, then leaned back into Shade’s warmth. Since I was doing what Lola wanted, she was content to lie back and wait, letting me take charge.

I wasn’t quite ready to take off my bra and panties yet. They were the last line of defense in case I changed my mind. Shade seemed to understand how I felt, for he didn’t push. Instead, he pulled me gently back onto the bed, gathered me in his arms, and kissed me.

Wanting and need filled me and I kissed him back, feeling desperate to connect with this special guy. Oh, yeah. This felt right. But when he did nothing more than run his hands and his mouth over me, I asked, “Don’t you want to . . . ?”

“Of course I do,” he murmured in my ear. “But I won’t until you’re ready.”

“Trust me, I’m *ready*.”

He chuckled, low and sexy. “I don’t mean that way. Losing your virginity is huge for a succubus.”

Puzzled, I said, “You said that before. Isn’t it huge for everyone?”

“Sure, but are you ready to lose everything else?”

Huh? “Like what?”

“You know.” He trailed a finger down my cheek and kissed the hollow of my neck. “The other things that come with being a virgin succubus.”

“What other things?”

He froze. “You mean you don’t know?”

“No!” Was he about to reveal something horrible? Scared to know, yet even more frightened not to, I sat straight up and stared at him. “Tell me.”

He propped up on one elbow. “When you came into puberty, you started developing unusual strength, speed, and healing powers, right?”

“Yes, but how does that relate?”

“You’ll lose all that the first time you make love. Forever.”

I sat back, stunned. So that’s where those extra powers came from. “You’re kidding me,” I breathed.

“Afraid not. I’m sorry, I thought you knew. Micah didn’t mention it?”

“No.”

Shade frowned. “Well, maybe he didn’t know. The male demons often lose theirs right away. He may not have been aware of the connection.” He thought for a moment. “That would explain a lot. I don’t think his father knew either.”

Holy crap. If I made love to Shade, or anyone for that matter, I’d lose all the abilities that made me . . . me. No more being able to satisfy Lola’s lust with the hunt, no more being the enforcer of the Demon Underground, no more job with the SCU . . . no more Slayer.

On the other hand, finally being able to make love, to become a real woman . . . to be more normal. Would it be worth it? I didn’t know. They said your first time was usually painful, awkward, and possible all-around yucky. Not a good trade-off.

What the hell kind of choice was this?

Try Me

Chapter Twenty



“Val?” Shade said tentatively. “Are you all right?”

“No. No, I’m not.” How could I possibly decide between two such appalling choices? Especially since one of them was horribly, irrevocably final. It sucked dirty rotten eggs. “I . . . I have to think about it.”

“I know,” he said softly. He got up to slip his jeans back on then drew me back down to the bed to cuddle. “Don’t worry, no pressure. You have all the time in the world to make a decision. And whatever you decide, it’ll be right.”

Well, in this case, *not* making a decision was actually making one. It made my head hurt.

I snuggled into his arms, needing comfort. That was all I intended, really, but Lola had been teased and left wanting twice this evening, and she wasn’t about to let me get away with it a third time. She surged into him almost roughly, bringing him to instant lust and keeping him on the edge as she slurped up all that lovely energy.

Appalled by her greediness, I tried to cut her off, but it was like trying to stop a spewing fire hydrant with a wine cork. I wrenched myself away from Shade and flattened myself against the door, as far away as I could get, and fought to get her under control.

That worked, thank God. Lola released Shade, and I was able to slow the flow to a trickle until I was able to stop altogether.

“Wow,” he said, unmoving on the bed. “That was . . . intense.”

I was really glad I couldn’t see Shade’s expression right now. “I’m *so* sorry, Shade. I didn’t mean to, but I lost control.”

“I know. It’s okay.” He paused. “Maybe I should leave.”

An excellent idea. I nodded. “Thanks for coming.” Oh, crap. Could I say anything more stupid? A wave of heat suffused me and I turned my back on him to grab my clothes and put them back on.

Shade dressed slowly, retrieving his knife from where I’d thrown it. When he was done, he stood by the door, hooded and enigmatic. “We all have issues dealing with our demons, Val. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Sheesh. I’d practically drained the guy and he was all understanding and everything. I couldn’t speak. What could I say? I just nodded.

I unlocked the door and he leaned forward to kiss me on the forehead. “We’ll try this again sometime. A real date,” he clarified.

“Sounds good,” I whispered.

We searched for Josh, but he must have recovered and taken off on his own. Fang and Princess were lying side by side in the living room, strangely quiet.

After Shade and Princess left, I plopped down on the couch and covered my face with my hands. This night hadn’t turned out at all like I’d wished. And though Lola had almost sucked Shade dry, it felt strangely unsatisfying.

Fang jumped up next to me and licked my hand. WHO LOVES YA, BABE?

“You do?” I asked with a smile.

YOU BET.

I hugged him to me, finding comfort in his small, fuzzy presence. “How much of that did you hear?” I asked into his fur.

PRETTY MUCH ALL OF IT. SUCKS TO BE YOU. But he cuddled closer to take the sting from his words and let me know he really did sympathize.

“Yeah.” That covered it. Like being poised between heaven and hell. Either I chose to be a wimpy wanton woman, or a strong celibate slayer.

Heck, I couldn’t be either right now. I had to stay home and twiddle my thumbs, wait for someone else to find a clue or the books, and hope my mysterious enemy didn’t decide to take out any more frustration on my family and friends. It made me positively look forward to Thanksgiving dinner and the inevitable family drama.

The front door opened then and Gwen came in. Her schedule was so screwy, I never knew when she’d be home and when she wouldn’t.

“You okay?” she asked. “You look like you just lost your best friend.”

Fang barked and wagged his tail. NO. I’M RIGHT HERE.

She laughed. “Don’t tell me. He just said *he’s* your best friend.”

“Yep.” It should have made me smile, but I didn’t feel like smiling right now.

Gwen shrugged off her jacket and dumped her stuff on a chair. “Okay, give. What’s wrong? My big brother acting like a jerk again?”

“No. In fact, he’s been really nice. He said you had a talk with him.”

She nodded. “So what’s wrong then?”

Hoping she’d have some good advice, I spilled the whole mess to her.

“Oh, Val, I’m sorry. I wish I could help, but I don’t have any advice to offer. I don’t know anyone else who’s ever had to make such a tough decision . . . except maybe your mom.”

“How do you figure? It was my father who was part-demon. Mom is fully human, like you.”

Gwen shook her head. “No, I mean a decision between two awful choices. Like the one she had to make when she asked you to leave.”

My laugh sounded bitter. “Yeah, right. Choose between the pretty blonde who looks like a clone of her and the uncontrollable lust demon who reminds her of her ex? Real tough.”

“Do you think it was easy?” Gwen asked softly. “Think about it. She had to decide whether to protect your sister or keep your love. Don’t you think that was difficult for her?”

“I doubt it. She was pretty mean, said some nasty things.” Then again, so had I.

“Maybe she had to be mean. Maybe she had to be tough on the outside and keep you at a distance to be strong enough to do what she felt was right. That has to be a horrible choice for any parent to make.” Gwen gave me a one-armed hug. “I’ve been thinking about this since I met her at the mall. I saw how she looked at you when you weren’t watching. Like she regretted everything that had happened.”

Fang nudged me. GWEN MIGHT BE RIGHT, YOU KNOW.

Strange. But if these two thought it was possible . . . After a few moments of reflection, I said, “She did seem nicer yesterday, when I saw her at the store.” And though it hadn’t been intentional, I had been a bad influence on my little sister. My demon “gifts” had led Jen to think I was special, and she wanted to be like me.

Gwen nodded. “So, if your mom was able to make such a horrible choice and survive it, maybe you can, too.” She cocked her head at me. “And maybe you can survive Thanksgiving with her tomorrow, too.”

I shrugged. Maybe. One really didn’t have anything to do with the other.

“You can always come home with Dan and me. The Sullivans are a rowdy bunch, but we have fun.”

Celebrate the holiday with someone else’s family? I’d feel like an outsider, and Thanksgiving wouldn’t be the same. Then again, it would never be the same at home either. How could it? “Thanks, but I’ll try to be a grown-up and go home. Besides, I already invited Shade. Maybe I’ll take a peace offering.”

“Good idea.” Gwen patted me on the arm once more. “Stop worrying so much and remember what Thanksgiving is all about—a day of gratitude for the good things in your life. Try to enjoy it.” With that parting shot, she picked up her things and went to her room.

Don’t worry, be happy . . . what kind of advice was that?

PRETTY GOOD IF YOU ASK ME, Fang said with a doggie grin.

“I didn’t.” But I knew he was only trying to help, so I kissed his fuzzy little head. Sighing, I stood up. “Maybe Micah has some wisdom to share.”

I went to my room and called him, but Micah seemed shocked that Shade knew something about lust demons that neither he nor his father had a clue about. He hadn’t known demons couldn’t interbreed either, and worst of all, he had no idea about what I should do. “I’m sorry, Val, this is a decision you’ll have to make on your own. But if you choose to uh, lose your strength, we’ll help you find something else to do.”

“Like what?” I had no other skills except helping Mom and Rick at the store, and I couldn’t see myself in retail for the rest of my life.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find something.”

Disappointment filled me at the whole conversation, but I didn’t want Micah to feel bad, so I said, “Okay, thanks.”

“Hey, if you decide not to go to your mom’s house tomorrow, you can always come here. We close the club and have a pot-luck dinner here for anyone in the Demon Underground who’s interested. Mostly singles like you and me.”

It sounded tempting, but . . . “Have you found the thief yet?”

“No, I would have let you know if I had.”

That’s what I figured. “Then no. After those two warnings, I figure I ought to stay away from demons and vamps.” Humans ought to be safe. “But I appreciate the invite.”

“Okay, have a great holiday.”

“Thanks.”

I hung up and flopped backward onto the bed. The icy blue and brown of my room soothed me, yet made me feel like a fraud. Chic and sophisticated? Hardly.

Fang jumped up beside me to curl against my side, his small body feeling warm against my side. YOU’LL GROW INTO IT, he assured me. WHY DON’T YOU TAKE GWEN’S ADVICE?

I sighed. “It’s hard not to worry.” I didn’t want to lose the very things that made me special. I’d always been defined by my strength, speed, and healing powers. If I lost those, who would I be? Just a girl with the ability to control men and make them feel horny. Oh yeah, great gift.

A LOT OF WOMEN WOULD ENVY YOU, Fang reminded me.

“None I’d like to know.” What kind of woman would relish that kind of power? Sick.

But I was tired of moping and worrying. “Okay, let’s go find a suitable peace offering.”



Just after noon the next day, Shade, Fang and I stood at the door of my former home and knocked. Mom liked us to dress up for holidays, so I had on my best white blouse and prettiest vest, with make-up, tamed hair and everything. Fang had picked out my outfit and Gwen had helped with the face stuff and loaned us her car so I wouldn’t ruin the look. I was determined to let Mom know that if she was willing to try, so was I. I’d even brought her favorite dessert, which Shade was holding for me.

He looked gorgeous as always, and had dressed in a nice sweater and slacks. I held his hand so no one would freak at seeing his demon side first.

Jen answered the door, grinning at the sight of us. “Oh, good, you came. And you brought your friend.” I introduced them and she gave me a swift hug then glanced at Fang. “Just let me lock the cat up.”

I CAN BE CIVILIZED, Fang said petulantly.

You can, but I’m not sure about the cat.

The hellhound seemed mollified at that, so we entered and I looked around. It looked pretty much the same as always, with maybe a few small changes. The delicious aroma of turkey cooking in the oven made the house smell wonderful. Mom came out, wiping her hands on a dish towel, and Rick joined us from the other room.

I introduced Shade, and I could tell they were all deliberately not noticing that we were holding hands. Might as well get it over with. Quickly, I explained about Shade and his swirliness, then let go of his hand.

Rick and Jen appeared fascinated, but Mom looked taken aback . . . like she wasn’t sure how to react. Finally, she said, “I’m so glad you came.” She looked uncertain whether to hug me or not, so I held out the bakery box. “Here. I brought this.”

She glanced inside. “But you hate pecan pie.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but I know you and Rick love it.”

Her expression softened. “And I made your favorite—apple.”

I smiled. It was an excellent start, and I vowed to keep it that way for the rest of the day.

Like always, Jen and I helped Mom get ready in the kitchen while Rick set the table with the best china and crystal. This year, he went all out and decked out the table with store-bought decorations in a harvest and abundance theme. Shade helped him and I could hear them talking from the other room, wondering what the heck they could have to say to each other.

When we sat down to eat, Rick thanked the Goddess and asked everyone to say what they were thankful for, starting with himself. "I'm thankful for the goddess's gifts of our health, our prosperity, and for having my whole family together on this special day."

Did he mean me? The sentiment made me blink back tears.

"Val," he prompted. "Your turn."

We'd never done this before so I was caught a little off guard. "I, uh, I'm grateful for my job, my friends, Fang, and my family." Surprised, I realized that I hadn't had three of those last year at this time. I was more blessed than I realized.

DAMN BETCHA, Fang said at my feet.

Shade pretty much said the same thing and Mom went on a little longer than we did, being much more global and politically correct in her thanks. Jen was more concerned with her narrow teenaged world, but they both expressed thanks for having me here today.

The rest of the meal went pretty well, with everyone trying to avoid sensitive topics and being on their best behavior. They didn't even object to me fixing a plate for Fang. I think it was the best meal I'd ever had in this house.

After dinner, we cleaned up then played Monopoly. That was safe, too, since there wasn't much about demons and vampires in the property acquisition game. Shade seemed comfortable enough and the others finally relaxed around him, especially since we tried to keep in skin-to-skin contact as often as we could.

For once, I did pretty good at the game. Rick usually won easily, but I had Fang to advise me this time. Who knew the cute little terrier could be such a ruthless real estate tycoon? But Rick won anyway and we ended up back at the table for dessert while Fang took a nap.

To keep Shade grounded, I slipped off my shoe and shimmied my bare foot up his leg. Sure, it might look like we were playing footsie, but I didn't care. This way he could look normal and we could both still have our hands free for pie. Since everyone was playing nice and we'd pretty much exhausted other subjects earlier, I asked, "Did the insurance cover the damage on the store?" Since Rick had said he was thankful for prosperity, it seemed like a safe subject.

Rick nodded. "We were surprised, but yes, they're covering most of it. Nothing was missing that we could see—just vandalized."

Jen piped up. "And we got it all cleaned up and ready to open for our big sale tomorrow."

Relieved that they hadn't suffered more because of me, I said, "Glad to hear it."

Mom, sounding tentative, asked, "Did you find any leads on who did it yet?"

"Dan and Micah are working on it, but I haven't heard anything yet." Apologetically, I added, "I'm afraid to do much more for fear they'll come after you."

Rick covered my hand with his. "We understand, honey. We appreciate everything you're doing."

It made me feel bad, 'cause I wasn't doing a darned thing. But there was one thing I could do. "Well, if you need any help tomorrow, let me know."

"I'd be glad to help as well," Shade offered.

"Thanks," Mom said. "But we should have it covered."

Jen rolled her eyes. "Yeah, if Josh shows up. He didn't bother to come to work the day of the break-in or the day after. Without any explanation, either." She glared at her parents. "No one else could have gotten away with that."

I shrugged. "If it's the same Josh I know, he couldn't. He was beaten pretty badly that day and wasn't healed until the following day. He was probably too embarrassed to mention it."

"How was he healed?" Rick asked. Shade and I exchanged an apprehensive glance, but Rick said, "Never mind. It's not important. Joshua did work yesterday."

Jen snorted, sounding a lot like Fang when he was disgusted. "Yeah, but you didn't see the scene he and his friend had outside at lunch time."

"Jennifer," Mom warned. "Be nice."

"Come on, Mom. He and that Emo chick were yelling at each other about vampires and stuff . . . outside, where anyone could hear them. It's the only time I've ever seen her when her eyes weren't all creepy purple glowy."

Shade jerked, looking startled, and I gave him a questioning look, but he just shook his head.

"Were you eavesdropping?" Mom asked with a frown.

"No. I was just getting some fresh air. They were shouting so loud, anyone could have heard them."

Probably because Mood had confronted Josh about how he felt about her, though that wasn't my info to share. Trying to ratchet down the tension a bit, I said in a soothing tone, "He was probably upset because the vamps were the ones who beat him."

"No, they weren't," Jen said indignantly. "At least, that's not what he said."

"He didn't?" That was odd. Shade's expression turned grim for some reason.

Rick held up his hands. "Can we please not talk about this now?"

I gave him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, but I think this might be important. Jen, can you tell us what they said?"

Looking pleased that she knew something useful, Jen nodded eagerly. "That girl yelled at him because he blamed the vamps when someone else really beat him up."

"Did she say who?" I asked.

“No. But he said it was really all the fault of the vampires because if they had saved his girlfriend like she asked, nothing bad would have happened to anyone.”

Shade let out a noise as if he wanted to say something, but I beat him to it. “Saved his girlfriend, how?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did they mention his girlfriend’s name?”

“Veronica,” Shade said, pressing his fingers to his forehead as if he had a headache or was trying to hold something in. “His girlfriend’s name was Veronica.”

“Yeah,” Jen said. “Is that important?”

“Very.” Andrew’s dead sister had also been Josh’s fiancé. That meant he had a great motive for wanting vamps dead. And he’d tried to pin his beating on them. “Did they mention anyone else?”

“Just something about Josh not meaning to hurt a girl called Shawndra.”

Shade rocked back and forth a little, looking pained. I peered into his face. “Shade, are you all right?”

He tried to tell me something with his eyes, but I wasn’t getting it. “Not really,” he managed.

My family looked worried. “He had a concussion not too long ago,” I explained. “He probably just needs some rest.” Or was having the same kind of epiphany I was and wanted to talk in private.

They all made sympathetic noises as I slipped my shoe back on and nudged Fang awake so we could head for the door. “Thanks for dinner,” I said. “It was great.”

“You’re welcome,” Mom said. “It was nice meeting you, Shade. I hope you feel better soon.”

I fidgeted while they all did the polite good-byes and was able to keep my mouth shut until we got into the car and shut the doors. But then I couldn’t keep quiet any longer. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I demanded.

Try Me

Chapter Twenty-One



“Probably,” Shade said. “We have to get to Club Purgatory right away.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where Josh is spending Thanksgiving, with the Underground.”

I started the car and headed toward the club. “Yeah, looks like he’s our guy.”

HE CAN’T BE THE THIEF, Fang said in disbelief. I CLEARED HIM.

“Mood,” Shade said curtly.

“Oh.” The light dawned. “What color are her eyes normally?”

“Hazel,” Shade said.

HUH? Fang sounded bewildered. THAT IS SO RANDOM. WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING?

Impatiently, I explained. “Whenever we use our powers, our eyes flash purple. But her eyes were purple *every time I saw her*. That’s because she was controlling his emotions whenever she was around other people.”

SO THAT’S WHY I DIDN’T PICK UP ON ANYTHING WHEN WE QUESTIONED JOSH, Fang said wonderingly. SHE HAD A LID ON HIM.

I sped up a bit more. “Was she in on this with him?”

“No,” Shade said. “He was upset about losing Veronica and she was just trying to help.”

I couldn’t see Shade’s expression, but his voice sounded tight and he was hunched over in his seat. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he said. “I’m just . . . remembering things.”

“Remembering what?”

“From when I healed Josh. It makes me dizzy.”

“I thought you couldn’t remember that stuff.”

“Normally, I can’t, but every time you or your sister mentioned something about what happened, I picked up flashes of his memory from when I healed him. Mood’s too.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know. I think it has something to do with you grounding me so soon after the healing.”

WHO CARES HOW? Fang demanded. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER? IS JOSH THE THIEF?

“Yes,” Shade said. “He’s a phase demon.”

Whoa—news flash. A phase demon could phase in and out of solid objects . . . meaning he could walk through walls. Everything fell into place. Josh, the thief. It totally made sense.

Fang snorted. NO WONDER IT WAS SO EASY FOR THE LITTLE BUGGER TO STEAL THE BOOKS.

It was important to figure this out, but I was afraid to ask much more, afraid it would hurt Shade.

HE’S OKAY, Fang assured me. HE’S NOT HURTING . . . JUST TRYING TO STAY STABLE AND KEEP FROM GETTING TOO DIZZY.

Traffic had slowed to a crawl downtown so unfortunately, we had time for Shade to continue translating flashes of Josh’s memories into something that made sense.

Desperate to cure Veronica’s cancer, Josh had asked the vampires to turn Veronica into one of them. They refused without any explanation, which ticked him off, but he didn’t do anything about it for awhile because Mood was keeping his emotions damped way down.

But when Mood jumped in to quiet the rumble at the club, she released him so abruptly that his anger at the vamps came back to him at once. He snuck out, phased through the office and the desk to take the books, then hid them inside the wall until he was able to come back and get them.

With the whiplash of emotions sawing through him, he wasn’t really rational at the time. He’d planned to find out what the books said about vampires, then return them before we figured it out. Unfortunately, we found them missing too soon, so he couldn’t. And . . . the books didn’t *want* to be returned.

Whoa, again. I had to break in at this point. “Books can’t feel,” I scoffed. “You must have that part wrong.”

NOPE, Fang said cheerfully, SHADE’S ‘JOSH MEMORIES’ ARE CLEAR ON THAT. THE BOOKS WHISPERED TO JOSH, WANTED HIM TO READ THEM AND USE THE DARK MAGICK INSIDE TO HURT HIS ENEMIES. Fang paused a moment. MICAH DID SAY THE BOOKS COULD BE DANGEROUS . . . AND TESSA SAID SHE COULD FEEL THE MAGICK IN THEM.

Then why had I never felt it? I shook my head. That didn't matter right now. Shade continued to sift through his flashes, explaining that Josh had been so vulnerable that the darkness inside those books had sent him over the edge.

The books said vampires react badly to demon blood, so he drew his own blood and used his phasing ability to inject it directly into the supplies at the blood banks. He thought it would make the vamps sick, not knowing it would make them *crazy*. Apparently, he was either too grief-stricken or too stupid to figure out that they'd turned Veronica down *because* they couldn't drink demon blood.

"What was that bit Jen mentioned about hurting Shawndra?" I asked.

Shade shook his head and concentrated. "Shawndra found Josh with the books and wanted to help. Since you were getting too close to learning the truth, he wanted to discourage you and throw suspicion on the vampires at the same time. He thought if a demon got hurt, too, and they told you to back off, you'd stop looking at Josh."

It had worked, too. "So he dumped a bunch of weed killer on his friend?" What kind of creep *was* he?

"He didn't mean to hurt her. They used the page from the encyclopedia, and Shawndra splashed too much weed killer on her arm. She didn't realize how much it would hurt, but when she did, she made Josh leave her so Micah and Tessa could help her." Shade sighed. "That's why Mood was so mad at Josh, because he hurt Shawndra."

It all made sense. "Where are the books now?" I asked. "Maybe we should get them first."

"Can't," Shade said.

"Why not?"

Fang snorted, plucking the answer from Shade's mind. BECAUSE ANDREW FIGURED OUT THAT JOSH HAD THE BOOKS AND TRIED TO GET JOSH TO HELP HIM WIPE OUT THE BLOODSUCKERS.

Shade nodded. "Josh tried to tell Andrew they weren't at fault, but Andrew wouldn't listen. Instead, he beat on Josh, trashed the store looking for the books, then tore apart Josh's room until he found them."

"So Andrew does have them?" I asked in disbelief as I pulled up to the club.

"He does now," Shade confirmed.

"Then why are we here?"

"He might be here . . . or Josh might know where he is."

"And just how do you control a phase demon?"

"He can't phase through anything living, like people or live plants."

"Okay, you hold onto him and this time *I'll* beat the answers out of him."

We headed into the club and I slowed my step and smiled, trying not to let everyone know how hard my heart was beating. The party seemed to have wound down, and most people were gone. The only ones left were Micah, Josh, Mood, and Tessa, who were all cleaning up.

“Hey,” I said lightly. “Did I miss all the good stuff?”

Tessa smiled. “Yes, sorry. I swear it looks like a pack of vultures swooped in and made off with everything.”

“There might be some fruitcake left,” Micah suggested with a smile.

“Uh, I’ll pass.” I doubted even Fang would eat *that*.

YOU GOT THAT RIGHT, BABE.

“Good decision,” Micah said and raised his eyebrow, silently asking me what was up. Guess I wasn’t as good at hiding my emotions as I thought.

I raised my voice. “Can everyone come here? I have some news.”

They murmured questions but came to join us. Shade spoke into Josh’s ear, then clasped Josh’s wrist as if to ground himself. Good idea.

“What’s your news?” Micah asked.

“I know who the thief is and why he did it.”

Josh’s expression didn’t change at all, but while Micah and Tessa exclaimed, Mood looked apprehensive, her eyes glowing purple.

“Can you please let go of Josh’s emotions?” I asked her.

“What?” She looked guilty and cast an apprehensive glance at Josh. “Why?”

Josh sighed. “It’s all right, Mood. Let me go.”

Mood looked uncertain but did as he asked. Her eyes gradually lightened to her natural color, and animation appeared in Josh’s expression. I hadn’t really noticed how dead it had seemed until now, when I saw him without Mood’s control. His face turned heartbreakingly sad, as if he were experiencing his girlfriend’s death all over again.

“Can you handle it?” Shade asked him.

Josh nodded and glanced ruefully down at Shade’s hand on his wrist. “But there’s no need for that. I gather the Slayer has figured out I took the books?”

“Val,” Shade corrected, and didn’t let go.

Josh looked confused. “What?”

“Her name is Val,” Shade insisted, looking annoyed. “She’s not a thing, not some monster you call the Slayer. Her name is Val. Say it.”

How sweet. It kind of gave me warm fuzzies all over.

But the others just looked stunned. I was a bit, too—I hadn’t expected Josh to admit his guilt so quickly.

“But why would you take them?” Tessa asked, looking bewildered.

I made an impatient gesture. “We’ll explain everything later, but right now, we need to find Andrew. *He* has the books now.”

Josh looked even more sad. “I-I’m sorry. I couldn’t stop him.”

“No, but I did,” Mood said grimly.

Now *that* surprised me.

Josh stared at her, his mouth open. “What? How?”

“After . . . after Shade healed you last night, and I got all your memories, I tracked Andrew down. He was ranting about how the books told him he had the perfect way to kill a lot of vamps in one fell swoop. All he had to do was set the mansion on fire during the daytime and he’d roast them alive. They’d never be able to defend themselves.” She grimaced. “He wanted to wait for Thanksgiving to make his revenge even more sweet, more to be thankful for.”

Fang snorted. SO YOU DID YOUR HOCUS POCUS AND MADE HIM THINK HAPPY THOUGHTS?

“You could say that.” Mood shrugged. “I had no choice. He was so crazy he wasn’t worried about the war that’d provoke between us and the vamps or the danger to the rest of the neighborhood.” She looked defensive. “I was going to tell Micah everything tonight, after the party.”

The knowledge that Andrew was under lock and key didn’t make Shade any happier. In fact, he looked even angrier. “Do you realize what would have happened to *Val* if Andrew had been stupid enough to go after the vamps? She almost had to go to work for Alejandro.”

“No, what?” Mood asked, looking fascinated by Shade losing his cool.

She might not know, but I had visions of being locked inside Alejandro’s mansion, slaving away in a house full of undead creatures, playing Renfield to his master vampire—and roasting alive with him. No thanks.

“Never mind that,” Micah said and gestured at Shade to calm down. “Where’s Andrew now? He’s obviously not currently under your control.”

“I fed him some sleeping pills and locked him in my basement. He’s not going anywhere.”

“I don’t know,” Josh said. “He’s stronger than you think, especially if he has those books.”

“Not to mention *meaner* than we thought,” I said.

Micah glanced at me. "You think the SCU could help with this, discreetly? He sounds dangerous."

"Hold on. I'll call Dan." He and Lt. Ramirez were the only ones I knew of in the SCU who wouldn't go off half-cocked.

Dan picked up on the first ring. "Sullivan here."

"Hey, Dan, it's a long story, but we've found the thief."

"Andrew, right? I've always suspected him."

"No, he didn't steal the books, but he got them later. He was planning to burn down the vamp mansion today. Kill Alejandro and all the others."

"Is he crazy? The other vamps would take revenge. There'd be all-out war."

"I know. The good news is, he's locked up in a basement right now. We need to take him into custody. Think you and Ramirez could help?"

"Hold on. I've got a call coming in. From Ramirez."

Silence. I waited anxiously while Dan talked to the lieutenant. When Dan came back on my phone he let out an expletive.

"What's wrong?"

"Andrew was spotted five minutes ago heading toward Alejandro's mansion. I can't get there in time. I'm on the other side of town."

I closed my eyes for a moment, wishing we could catch a break, even a little one. I glanced outside. It was still about an hour until sunset . . . plenty of time for Andrew to have himself some vampire barbeque. "I'm at the Demon Underground," I told Dan. "So I have folks who can help."

"Be careful, Val."

"Thanks."

I clicked the phone shut.

Shade, still holding on to Josh, looked appalled . . . and more than a little ticked. "Andrew's rage, combined with the books' dark magick . . .

NOT A GOOD COMBINATION, Fang said grimly.

No kidding. Andrew by himself was bad enough, but with the addition of a powerful magickal influence . . . ? We were so screwed.

Try Me

Chapter Twenty-Two



Micah took charge. “Tessa, call Ludwig and tell him to meet us there, then you stay here and watch Josh. Mood, come with me, and I’ll pick up Kyle. Let’s do this.”

I headed for Gwen’s car, then realized Shade wasn’t following me.

HE TOOK OFF ALREADY, Fang said. ON A MOTORCYCLE.

That was strange. Why hadn’t he just waited for me? As we sped toward the mansion, Fang said, YOU CAN’T LET SHADE GET THERE FIRST.

“Why not?”

MICAH’S WORRIED ABOUT SHADE. WHEN A SHADOW DEMON GETS ANGRY . . .

“I know, but he’s been able to keep it together so far. And I’ll be there to help him.”

YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND. I CAN SENSE SHADE FROM HERE. HE’S REALLY PISSED THAT ANDREW WOULD HAVE SET A FIRE AT THE MANSION EVEN IF YOU WERE WORKING THERE, NOT TO MENTION PUTTING YOU IN THE POSITION OF HAVING TO WORK FOR THE BLOODSUCKERS, AND HE’S NOT LISTENING TO ANYTHING I SAY.

“Well, maybe he’ll listen to me.”

WITH ANDREW AND THE DARK MAGICKS EGGING HIM ON?

Oh, crap. Fang was right. I redoubled my speed and spotted Shade up ahead. But he managed to stay ahead of me the whole way on his more maneuverable bike. When we got to the mansion’s gates I thought for sure he’d try to crash them, but instead, he slowed only enough to punch in the code and barely waited for them to open before he sped up the long driveway to the house. As I zoomed to a halt at the front door, several lengths behind him, I saw the two human guards come toward us, their hands stuck threateningly inside their jackets.

“Is Andrew here yet?” I asked Fang.

Fang sniffed the air. I SMELL HIM . . . AND GASOLINE. ON THE LEFT SIDE OF THE HOUSE.

Oh, crap. The side with all the trees . . .

“Talk to the guards,” Shade said curtly as he took off running. “They know you. I’ll take care of Andrew.”

VAL, NO, Fang said. DON’T LET HIM GO.

Like I had a choice. Shade had already disappeared around the side of the house. The guards ran after him, guns drawn. Being shot wouldn’t help Shade calm down any. “Wait,” I yelled, jumping out of the car and waving at them to stop. “We’re trying to help.”

They slowed and one of them said to the other, “She’s the Slayer. Alejandro did say she’s a friend.”

The other one glared at me, obviously wanting to disagree. “Talk fast and make it good,” he barked.

I explained what was going on. “You go tell Alejandro, and we’ll take care of the demon.” I turned Lola loose on them a little, to get them under control. “Your first job is to get the vampires to safety, right? Move!”

The two men nodded and bolted inside the mansion. Fang yelled, COME ON.

He bounded to the left and I followed him around the side of the house. Shade and Andrew were slugging it out and the smell of gasoline was everywhere—on the grass, the trees, and even on the brick walls. With the assistance of dark magicks, Andrew might even be able to make *brick* burn. Crap. He was really determined to see everything go down in flames. And with the trees so close to this side of the house, it could spread to the rest of the neighborhood quickly.

I hurled Lola at him, but it did no good. He was too angry, too caught up in the wild, twisted magick, and Lola couldn’t grab a toehold.

Andrew head-butted Shade, who fell backward, looking like he was about to explode at any moment. What would be worse? Andrew’s fire magick or Shade losing control, then channeling every vicious demon who wanted a way into our world?

Andrew looked triumphant. I crashed into him, taking him down. At that moment, I seriously thought about staking him, even though he wasn’t a vampire.

I wrestled with him, trying to pin him. But though I was stronger, he was bigger and wilder, thrashing in all directions, so that it was hard to hold onto him.

Finally, Andrew went rigid and glared at me. My skin began to grow warm. Heat swallowed me.

“Get off him, Val,” Shade yelled.

“No!”

DO IT, Fang yelled. YOUR CLOTHES ARE SMOLDERING.

So that was why I felt so warm. Crap. I sprang away from Andrew. Tiny licks of flame ignited all over my clothes.

“Roll,” Shade said urgently, shucking his hoodie.

I rolled in the dirt as Shade beat out the flames with his jacket. Fang danced around, yipping with worry and anger.

Andrew scrambled to his feet. “Dirty vampire lovers,” he shouted. He blasted a fist of flame at the house. The house and the trees next to it went up immediately, the flames licking greedily along the brick and bark, hungering for more fuel. Crap, crap, crap. I was no longer on fire, but everything else was.

I didn’t have any power over the elements. Where the hell was Micah?

“No!” Shade yelled.

CONTROL HIM, Fang barked.

It hadn’t worked before, but maybe it would now. I gathered my wits together and dug down deep then thrust Lola’s needs into Andrew, who was raising his arms and dancing like he’d just scored a touchdown.

This time, I caught him with his magicks down, so he froze in place.

NOT HIM, Fang said. SHADE!

What? I glanced at Shade and saw him standing stock still, his arms spread wide, fists clenched, and head thrown back as if he were straining against something. His ribbons of light whirled faster than I’d ever seen them, and purple flashed so that it looked like the mother of all lightning storms going on inside his body.

Oh, no. And when Shade’s anger opened up the doors between dimensions . . .

WE’LL BE BUTT-DEEP IN DEMONS, Fang said. STOP HIM.

I pulled half of Lola’s attention away from Andrew and slammed it into Shade. She wasn’t as needy, wasn’t as strong since she’d already fed, and the energy seemed to disappear into him, out the other side to . . . somewhere else. Another dimension?

No, no. This couldn’t be happening. I pulled some of the energy from Andrew and fed it into Shade. It helped slow the whirling energies a little, but not enough. Ignoring the raging fire behind me that had now leapt to a couple of trees, I threw myself at Shade and wrapped myself around him, hoping the bodily contact would help.

Shade’s face was distorted in agony. “No,” he screamed. “Kill me!”

“No,” I shouted back. I siphoned more energy from Andrew, but it still wasn’t enough. If I let go of Andrew, he might set fire to the whole city. He looked crazy enough to do that. But if I didn’t focus all of Lola’s energy on Shade, Shade would kill himself rather than let a herd of demons into our world.

No way. Not going to happen.

Hoping like hell I could capture Andrew again after Shade was under control, I released Andrew and concentrated Lola’s entire attention on Shade. Wrapping myself even tighter around him and dragging him down to the ground, I

kissed him hard. I forced even more energy into his body, letting the tendrils fill him up with lust and longing, grounding him as much as I could in this world, in this body.

Slowly, it worked. I felt Shade relax as he gradually gained full control of himself. I knew he was okay when his arms went around me and he returned the kiss.

“Dude,” Kyle said above us. “This is so not the time.”

Shade pulled away and laid back on the ground, looking wiped out. “Thanks, I’m okay now. Go get Andrew.”

I scrambled up and saw Micah and Mood had arrived with Ludwig and Kyle. Ludwig was using his massive fists to punch huge geysers of water at the fire. So *that* was his talent. He was a water demon.

“Mood, can *you* control Andrew?” I called.

She shook her head, looking strained. “I’ve been trying to reach him, but he’s too strong. I can’t . . .” She slumped. “I lost him.”

“Can you help me with Shade? We really, really need Shade to stay calm.”

“Sure,” she said, looking glad for something to do.

I glanced around. The sun was setting, and I couldn’t see Fang anywhere.

I’M OVER HERE, came Fang’s voice. ANDREW IS HEADING FOR HIS CAR.

I ran through the woods. The hellhound was smart enough to stay out of Andrew’s sight, but he’d followed him after the coward had run off.

I caught sight of Andrew at a distance, as he was about to climb the estate’s wrought iron fence. I wasn’t sure if Lola could reach him, but I had to try. I slammed Lola into him with all my might. “Stop, right there!”

It worked. Andrew froze with one foot on top of the fence and the other on this side. A dazed expression replaced the fury on his face. I walked slowly toward him, debating what to do. I could tell him to impale himself on the fleur-de-lis decorations on top and claim he’d done it to himself on accident. Who would know?

YOU WOULD, Fang reminded me.

“Yeah, well, it was only a fleeting thought.” I sighed. “Andrew, get down from there and come face the music.”

With Lola suffusing every part of his body, Andrew had no choice but to follow me back to the house. He looked almost groggy, as if I were the Pied Piper and he was a hypnotized rat. I was glad to see that Ludwig had put the fire out, but there was a loud argument going on between demons and vamps at the front of the house. Alejandro and his two lieutenants were outside, now that the sun had set.

Shade hung back and stayed out of it, thank heavens, but the rest were having a shouting match amid the stench and smoke. Mood looked too tired to control anyone but Shade.

When Austin saw us, he flashed his fangs at Andrew and snarled, “Fire demon.”

Everyone turned and surged toward us, but I held up my hands. “Stop unless you want to end up in thrall like him.”

I let them have a taste of Lola, just to remind them what I could do. They simmered down, but Luis, for one, still looked murderous. Even Alejandro glared at Andrew.

“He’s just a stupid kid,” Micah said.

“He’s adult enough to try to kill everyone in this house,” Luis bit out. “Justice demands that you hand him over to us for vengeance.”

“He wasn’t totally responsible for his actions—the dark magicks in the books had a lot to do with that,” Micah said. “But he’ll be punished, I promise you.”

“How?” Luis sneered. “In the human courts?”

“No, by us,” Micah said. “I *promise* you, he will be appropriately punished.”

Alejandro made an impatient gesture. “Can we trust you?”

Micah stiffened to his full height, and Ludwig ranged himself alongside his leader, clenching and unclenching his fists. Damn. Looked like a fight was about to erupt again.

“Stop it,” I insisted, pushing a little with Lola to make my point. “Alejandro, Andrew isn’t the one who poisoned your blood. Another demon did that.”

“Demons,” Luis spat. “I knew it.”

I felt like slapping him but stared down Alejandro instead. “It was *your* fault, Alejandro. You didn’t warn the others. You didn’t tell them the truth.”

“What are you talking about?” came Alejandro’s furious question.

“Andrew was angry because the vamps refused to turn his sister to save her life.”

This news made the other vamps trade frowns. Austin looked taken aback. “We can’t turn demons.”

Alejandro nodded. “There is a prohibition against it.”

“Because . . . ?” I prompted. I knew the truth about demon blood making vamps sick, but I wanted *him* to tell his people, not me.

Alejandro’s nostrils flared. “That is a private matter for our kind only.”

Oh, he *knew* all right. But he was keeping it secret from the others. I was beginning to hate secrets.

“Alejandro. Don’t you understand what I’m getting at? This explains what happened to Lorenzo and the others. What made them go mad.”

Alejandro’s expression changed as my point sank in. “So *that* is what happened to my people.”

“Yes. The donated human blood was mixed with a demon’s and that is what made your vamps crazy.”

Austin and Luis looked stunned.

“*His* blood?” Luis asked, pointing at Andrew.

“No, someone else’s,” I told him.

“The books told you of this?” Alejandro asked. “The books with the dark magicks?” At my nod, his eyes narrowed. “Where are they now?”

Good question. “Andrew?” I asked.

He shook his head. Still under Lola’s control, he had a zombie expression. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Everyone stared at him in shock.

“They didn’t want to burn in the fire, so they told me to hide them, and I did . . . but I can’t remember where.”

HE’S TELLING THE TRUTH, Fang said in disgust. THE MAGICKS HAVE CLOUDED HIS MEMORY.

“They must be found and destroyed,” Alejandro insisted. “They could be very dangerous in the wrong hands . . . to *all* of us.”

No kidding. “*Secrets* are dangerous in the wrong hands,” I reminded him. “If the fact that vampires couldn’t drink demon blood was common knowledge, Veronica would have known the vampires couldn’t turn her, and so would Andrew, and this never would have happened.”

Micah spoke. “This settles it. Andrew was a victim of vampire secrecy.”

I turned on him. “You’re no better.”

He looked taken aback. “What?”

“Always with the damned secrets. Ooh, let’s not let anyone else know what makes us vulnerable, let’s not let anyone know what the encyclopedia can do, let’s not let anyone get close enough to help us.” I knew I sounded like a drama queen, but I didn’t care. “Who died and made you keeper of all the demon secrets?”

“Well, my father did, actually.”

Fang snorted in amusement, but I ignored him. “If the Demon Underground hadn’t kept secrets even from their own, kids like me wouldn’t have to grow up feeling like freaks. And we might have figured out that Josh is a phase de-

mon long ago, and— ” Alejandro made a negating gesture. “Some things should be kept confidential, for our very survival.”

“Maybe. But at what cost?”

“You can’t really expect us to reveal *all* our secrets,” Micah protested.

“Okay, maybe not. But at least you can think about it and see what makes sense to share.”

Alejandro and Micah both looked stubborn, but I was glad to see I got them thinking about it.

“What about these two criminal demons?” Luis asked. “The fire demon and the phase demon must pay for what they did to our people.”

Before they could start arguing again, I asked Alejandro, “Are the poisoned vamps doing better?”

“Yes, Lorenzo and the others are almost fully recovered.”

That was a relief. “Then why don’t you and Micah decide the punishment *together*?” They were the most level-headed of this bunch, and it would help to set a precedent for inter-species cooperation.

They looked at each other. Micah frowned. “Providing he remembers that Josh and Andrew were crazed with grief, influenced by dark magick, and believed that your people were responsible for Veronica’s death.”

Alejandro inclined his head. “And providing you are able to keep the two under restraint until a decision is made.”

Micah nodded decisively. “Val, if you would please put Andrew to sleep?”

I let Lola surge deeper into him. “Andrew, go to sleep.”

He slumped down to the ground, passed out.

Micah nodded. “Good. Kyle, if you would keep him there until we are ready to deal with him?” To the others, he explained, “Kyle is a dream demon.”

Wow. He was sharing secrets and everything. Progress.

Micah held out his hand to Alejandro. “I apologize for what my people did. I hope we can make up for it somehow.”

Alejandro took his hand and smiled. “By agreeing to be by our side when we come out, perhaps?”

Micah winced. “I’ll have to think about *that*. Shall we talk later, after everyone has had a chance to cool off?”

Alejandro nodded.

As Micah and Alejandro discussed the arrangements, and Ludwig and Kyle hauled Andrew off, the other vamps went back into the house. Shade came up behind me to sling an arm around my shoulders and murmur, “Great job.”

AW, SHUCKS, Fang complained. WE DIDN'T EVEN GET TO KILL ANYTHING.

"That means she's getting better at controlling situations," Shade told him with a grin.

I leaned into him, loving the feeling as his arms closed around me. "Thanks."

"Sorry I was more of a hindrance than a help."

I pulled away to look into his face. "No, you weren't."

"Yes, I was, and without you, San Antonio might be on fire or overrun with demons right now. Thank you for stopping me . . . without killing me."

"Hey, I couldn't kill you just when I'm getting to know you. And thank *you* for helping me with Lola. I have much more control now."

He grinned and kissed me on the nose. "So we're good for each other. You help me control my demon and I'll help you control yours. Like we're destined to be together or something."

Fang rolled his eyes. OH, GAG ME.

Shade laughed and lowered his voice. "Even without making love in the usual sense of the word."

I felt myself flush at the thought. That was a decision for another time. Too much had happened today to think about that. For now, I was happy to just be with my new boyfriend. I sighed in contentment. I'd learned where my strength came from, caught the thief, and, even though I hadn't retrieved the encyclopedia, at least no one else could find it, for now.

I was learning to get Lola under control, and had even improved my relationships with Dan and my family. Now that I could sit back and let Micah and Alejandro take all the responsibility, make all the decisions, and keep the hot-heads under control, life was good. But not too boring, I hoped.

"Val," Micah called. "Can you come here a moment?"

I reluctantly peeled myself away from Shade.

"Alejandro reminded me of your agreement to come work for him," Micah said.

Uh-oh. I hoped he'd forgotten that. Shade rejoined me and hugged me hard with one arm. Though he didn't say anything, I knew he was urging me to get out of this any way I could. Luckily, it looked like Mood was keeping an eye on his temper still.

I smiled brightly, as if my cheeriness would hold back the darkness about to descend. "But no one else was hurt, so the agreement is null and void."

"Not exactly," Alejandro drawled. "I believe you said if someone else *tried* to harm my people, you would come to work for me. Andrew did try."

“That wasn’t my intention and you know it. Besides, we just helped you avert a grisly death by fire here. You owe us.”

Alejandro regarded me thoughtfully. “Perhaps. Shall I suggest a compromise?”

“Like what?”

“You come along to all of the discussions our two groups have together. You seem to have a knack for helping people to see reason, and for ending conflicts as well as starting them.”

Relieved, I said, “Okay, I can do that.”

But Alejandro wasn’t finished. “*And* you work for me for a short period of time.”

“How short?” I asked apprehensively.

“Let’s say . . . until the books are found and dealt with, and we have revealed ourselves to the world.”

“Don’t do it,” Shade whispered.

But I had no choice. I’d given my word. Besides, I had to find those books, no matter who I worked for.

“Can we put this in writing . . . in a contract?” This time I wanted it spelled out exactly how long I had to work for the creatures I was accustomed to slaying and exactly what I was to do.

He smiled. “Of course.”

I didn’t trust that smile, but I’d make sure I had a damned good lawyer to help me put that contract together before I signed away my life. “Okay, deal,” I said and shook his hand, wondering if I was making a mistake.

THE QUESTION ISN’T *IF YOU’RE MAKING A MISTAKE*, Fang informed me. THE QUESTION IS, HOW BIG IS THE MISTAKE GONNA BE . . . AND HOW MUCH IS IT GOING TO HURT?

I glanced at him. *You really think it’ll be that bad?*

He looked gloomy. UNFORTUNATELY, YEAH. BUT AT LEAST YOU’LL GET YOUR WISH.

What wish?

YOU WON’T BE BORED.



Try Me

A Note From Parker Blue

Dear Reader,

Thanks to all the fans of *Bite Me* who asked me for more adventures with Val, Fang, and the others. I have to say, I didn't expect Shade to be such a major character in the series. He showed up in *Bite Me* as a throw-away character, but he fascinated me so much I gave him a bigger role in that book than I had planned.

As you can tell, he fascinates Val, too, and will definitely be around for book three of the Demon Underground series. I continue to learn more about the characters as I write them, so I'm as eager to know what happens next as you are.

To learn more, please visit my website at parkerblue.net.

Parker Blue

Colorado Springs, CO

Try Me



The vampires want it.

The demons want it too.

And someone is willing to kill Val for it.

Val and Fang have to find the powerful Encyclopedia Magicka before either of San Antonio's warring underworld factions locate it, or the consequences will be deadly for the entire city.

As usual, Val's vampire enemies (they still call her 'The Slayer'), want her dead, and even some of her fellow demons may be less than trustworthy, since they'd like to grab the legendary book of spells before she does. Val has a personal claim to the Encyclopedia—her demon father left it to her when he died—but someone stole it recently. Where did the thief hide it?

Battling vamps and dodging demons, Val struggles to unravel the mystery. At the same time, she's fighting her attraction to sweet, sexy Shade, her favorite shadow demon. Rumor has it that Val will lose her part-demon, vampire-fighting powers if she gives herself to him.

With a crowd of vamps and demons out to trick her or kill her, it's not a good time for her to risk her job as the city's best vampire hunter by falling in love. The stakes are high—and aimed right at her heart. But Lola, Val's hungry little lust demon, doesn't like being denied. Will Lola finally get her way?



a Demon Underground novel

parker blue

Fang
Me

"kick-butt smart"
~ YA Book Nerd Blog

Try Me

Fang

Me

Parker Blue

Try Me

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), events or locations is entirely coincidental.



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Try Me

Try Me

THE DEMON UNDERGROUND SERIES

Parker Blue

BITE ME

TRY ME

FANG ME

DEDICATION

For the wonderful furry creatures who fill my life with love and companionship—Mo, a terrier-poodle mix (the model for Fang) rescued through Dreampower Animal Rescue; Daisy, a sweet Maltese rescued from a puppy mill by National Mill Dog Rescue; and Spooky, a long-haired white cat inherited from my mother, who adopted him from the local humane society.

Pets fill your life with joy and laughter and love you unconditionally—what's not to like? Adopt one today and practice responsible pet ownership!

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

My name is Val Shapiro, and I'm a succubus lust demon. Well, partially anyway. I'm only one-eighth demon, but that's the part that dominates my life. It's a bitch to keep the lust under control—I almost drained a guy dry of his sexual energy when I was sixteen—but I do a good job of keeping it in check by channeling the lust and the extra strength and speed that comes with it into slaying vampires on the dark streets of San Antonio. Hence my nickname, the Slayer.

My dumb younger half-sister, Jen, wants to be just like me, even though she's totally normal. If you can call a perky blonde cheerleader type normal . . . Anyway, when Jen sneaked out to join me on one of my hunts, my mom and step-father panicked and figured I was a bad influence on her, so they fired me from their New Age bookstore and kicked me out of the house—on my eighteenth birthday no less. Happy birthday to me.

It turned out okay, though, 'cause I gained an awesome new telepathic canine friend, Fang—part hellhound, part scruffy terrier, and all snark. He was sent to me by Micah Blackburn, leader of the Demon Underground. I hadn't even known it existed until then, probably because their main goal in life is to keep themselves hidden and help each other find jobs and live ordinary lives where so-called “normals” won't freak out at the sight of them or what they can do.

Oh, yeah, I also lucked out and found a job with the city's Special Crimes Unit, so I actually got *paid* to kill vampires. When they paired me up with mortal Dan Sullivan to shut down a vein of bloodsuckers who were terrorizing the city, we learned they were actually an organization of “good” vamps called the New Blood Movement who set up blood banks so they could snack on stupid volunteers. I thought Dan and I had kind of a romantic thing going, but when I lopped off the head of the real bloodsucker responsible for the vampire problem, Dan's ex-fiancée Lily Armstrong, it kinda ruined that. Not to mention that he was totally weirded out when the succubus inside me—I call her Lola—tried to sink her hooks into him and slurp up all his yummy goodness.

So, he dumped me and found someone human to snog with. No biggie. I got over him when I got to know Shade. Part shadow demon, he has interdimensional energies whirling through his body. All you can see of him is that swirl, unless he's touching someone else to ground himself in this reality. Then he's totally hot. And he touches me a *lot*. Just to help me keep Lola under control, you understand. Not that it's a hardship. Did I mention he's totally hot?

Anyway, someone stole the *Encyclopedia Magicka* that my demon father had given me, and used it to poison the blood banks and turn the vamps insane. Not that I was totally opposed to that, but it meant they were hurting innocents, so I helped the vamps catch the phase demon, Josh, who'd poisoned them, and Andrew, the fire demon who tried to burn down their home.

Turns out the books have some kind of dark magick inside them that make the demons go nutso. But to make it up to the Movement, I agreed to take some time off from the force and help them find the books before the dark

Try Me

magicks make someone else do something stupid.

How? I have no clue.

CHAPTER ONE

Weird. Definitely weird. I stood outside the wrought-iron gates of the Alamo Heights mansion at a quarter to midnight and gawked. Sure, the dark spooky brick mansion housed the biggest vein of vampires in San Antonio—I knew that. But the fact that said creepy mansion was lit up by cheery red and green Christmas lights? Too surreal.

Okay, it was the season, with Thanksgiving over and done with a week ago, but after all the mayhem and violence that had happened here, it seemed totally bizarre.

Fang snorted. YOU WERE PART OF MOST OF THAT MAYHEM AND VIOLENCE, he said on a private channel in my mind.

Here I am, Val Shapiro, the mighty Slayer, feared by vampires, demons and humans...yet somehow totally *disrespected* by my own dog.

SOMEONE HAS TO KEEP YOU FROM GETTING A FAT HEAD, Fang retorted. AND WHO BETTER THAN YOUR BEST FRIEND?

It was my turn to snort. Fat head, me? Fat chance.

Shade bumped my shoulder with his. “You okay?”

Ah, Shade, my new boyfriend. How did I get so lucky? The shadow demon and I tried to date like a normal couple, but our relationship wasn’t exactly ordinary. I kept the shadow demon within Shade grounded in this reality so he didn’t let the big bad demons through into our world, and he fed the lust demon within me.

Not like *that*. I was still untouched, cherry, a total “V”. I’d just found out recently that giving that up would be a way bigger choice than I’d ever dreamed. Lose my virginity, lose my powers. Yep, those very things that made me the Slayer—enhanced senses, fast reflexes, and rapid healing—would be forever lost to me if I ever did the deed. So, I remained a frustrated slayer.

As Fang put it, sucks to be me.

Oh well, circumstances had forced me to be the Slayer for a while longer. Once this job was over, I’d have to make the big decision.

I bumped Shade back. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t really have to do this, Val,” he said.

I sighed. It was what I wanted to hear, but it wasn't true. "Yeah, I do. I not only gave my word, I signed a contract." Though it had taken a week for the demon lawyer and the vampire lawyer to hammer out a contract we could all agree on.

Fang spoke to both of us this time. DEMON LAWYER . . . BLOODSUCKING LAWYER. REDUNDANT MUCH?

Shade chuckled and I gave Fang a wry grin. "I really don't have a choice. Besides, I took leave from Special Crimes and if I don't do this, there's no pizza in your future." Hellhound or not, Fang liked the creature comforts of urban living.

THEN GET IN THERE. GO TO WORK. WORK, WORK, WORK.

I didn't mind working. I just wished I could bring home the bacon by slaying evil vampires on the dark streets of San Antonio. That was a whole lot more appealing than playing assistant to Alejandro, leader of the New Blood Movement, one of the "good" vampires . . . who apparently had strung up twinkling Christmas lights as a sign of the Movement's sweetness and light.

I glanced at the lights again and sighed.

"I'm sure Lieutenant Ramirez would take you back in the SCU in a heartbeat," Shade said.

I COULD EAT CHEAP, Fang offered. THIS ISN'T WHAT I SIGNED ON FOR.

Too bad I had. "It's only midnight to dawn, five days a week," I reminded them. The lawyer had gotten me that much. That was about seven hours a day this time of year, but hey, it was better than fourteen.

Shade hugged me with one arm. "I worry about you."

My legs went all limp and rubbery. Sheesh. Here I was, eighteen years old—an adult who faced down bloodsuckers—and feeling all gooey and dopey like a kid, just because a guy said he cared about me.

GAG ME.

I glared at Fang. *Shut up. You're no better when you're around Princess.* Fang had a thing for Shade's dog. Her royal highness claimed to be a pure-bred Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, but there was definitely a lot of hellhound in her, too.

Ignoring Fang's eye roll, I hugged Shade back, loving the way it felt to touch a guy without worrying about Lola ripping his energy out of him. "I'll be fine. And you can always call me if you get too worried."

"Okay." Then, a little tentative and awkward, he placed his hands on either side of my face, so that the swirling mess that was his face disappeared and revealed the sight of Shade I couldn't get enough of. He kissed me gently, and I melted.

Lola stirred. She liked Shade a *lot*, and was obviously up for any lust energy he cared to send our way. But I didn't like to take advantage too often. Nothing wrong with going in to a dangerous situation feeling a little edgy. Kept me on

my toes.

But turning down all that sexy energy didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the heck out of his kiss. I met his with a hungry one of my own, and it was just me . . . and Shade. I loved this kind of kiss, where I knew he was kissing me because he liked *me* and not just because Lola made him feel really good.

Fang butted in between us. ENOUGH WITH THE LOVEY DOVEY STUFF. YOU PROMISED TO MEET ALEJANDRO AT MIDNIGHT.

Reluctantly, I pulled away and checked my cell. Yeah, I had five minutes. "I'd better go," I told Shade.

He nodded. "Okay, but call me as soon as you get home."

"I will." After one last brief kiss, I let go of him and grabbed my Valkyrie motorcycle.

Shade punched in the combination to open the gates and Fang trotted along beside me as I walked the bike up the long driveway. It seemed a bit out of place next to the limo and shiny black luxury cars, but who cared? I wasn't here to impress anyone.

I heard Shade's motorcycle roar off and I steeled myself. Alone now except for Fang, I might as well get it over with. There were no guards at the door this time. I hesitated for a moment, wondering why I had no problem battling a brace of vampires, but felt a twinge of fear at the thought of playing nice and being assistant to the one vamp I actually considered *good*.

BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT STUPID, Fang said. AND HE PRETTY MUCH OWNS YOU UNTIL YOU FIND THE MISSING *ENCYCLOPEDIA MAGICKA*.

I grimaced. Too true. But before I could knock on the door, it was opened from the other side.

Austin, a tall, lean cowboy, and one of Alejandro's lieutenants, stood there grinning at me. "Hello, darlin'. You plannin' on coming in sometime tonight?"

Though Austin was always nice and polite, he also usually managed to make me feel foolish.

"Sure, why not?" As a comeback, it was pretty lame, but a few hours from now, I'd think of a real zinger.

Austin bowed me through with a flourish and I tried to act nonchalant as I sauntered in the door. I followed him into the great room—a huge space with soaring ceilings, immaculate dark hardwood floors and lots of heavy wood and wrought iron furniture. Very Spanish Mediterranean.

Not that I could see much of it today—the entire place was filled with bloodsuckers. What the heck . . . ? Vampires, wearing black leather, black silk, black you-name-it, filled the room to overflowing, spilling down the hall and into the next room like an inkblot. Conversations came to a halt and I saw nostrils flare as if they scented my humanity and the blood that lay beating just beneath the fragile layer of my skin.

Fang's hackles rose and he took a step back, growling.

Fear spiked through me, making my blood sizzle and my eyes flash purple. Lola leapt up, ready and willing for action. I checked to make sure the stakes were still hidden under my vest in the back waistband of my jeans. Yep, but three wasn't gonna do it with this crowd.

When the vamps didn't move, I realized maybe attack wasn't what was on their bloody minds. Instead, they all stared at us, unmoving, some with amusement or boredom on their faces, some disgusted, but most with no expression at all.

"What's going on?" I asked Austin.

Alejandro swept forward, all Latin grace and sophisticated host. "My apologies," he said, smiling at me with his typical charm. And he had a lot of it. With his long, dark hair, smoking hot bod, and a natural charisma, he oozed sex appeal . . . and he knew it. Luckily, I'd never been sucked in under his spell. A little matter of his drinking blood . . .

He seemed embarrassed. "I should have warned you I invited all of the members of the Movement to meet you."

No kidding. But now that I'd relaxed, I noticed something else—pine garlands with red bows topped the windows, holiday do-dads seemed to perch on every surface I could see, and there was even a Christmas tree in the corner . . . with twinkling fairy lights on it, fergawdsakes. Baffled, I asked, "What's with the holiday cheer?"

Alejandro laughed. "Only Valentine Shapiro would notice such a thing in a roomful of vampires."

Luis, another of Alejandro's lieutenants and a snooty Spanish aristocrat type, sniffed with disdain. "There is more than one reason for the season. Some of us like to celebrate the holidays just like humans." But from the sneer on his face and in his voice, I gathered he wasn't one of them.

WHY NOT? Fang asked. THEY WERE HUMAN . . . ONCE.

I guess . . . It was just hard to picture Luis and some of the others knocking back a bit of egg nog or hanging stockings by the chimney. Of course, there were no nativity scenes or crosses. There was a limit to how completely the vamps could co-opt Christmas.

Rosa, a gorgeous Latina with long flowing hair and the third of Alejandro's lieutenants, gestured impatiently. "Why not? Besides, it makes us seem more . . . likeable . . . when we come out, yes?"

Now that made more sense. The vampires of the New Blood Movement wanted to come out into the mainstream, wanted to be accepted for what they were, not what the lurid literature and entertainment industry had made them out to be.

OH, YEAH, ALL THIS CRAP IS GONNA *REALLY* MAKE THEM LOOK HARMLESS.

I agreed, but tried to be more diplomatic. "Uh, maybe. But do you think you might be trying a little too hard?"

"Told you so," someone muttered from the crowd.

Alejandro sighed. "Perhaps you are right. But we want to put people at ease, let them see there is nothing to fear."

WHAT THEY WANT IS MORE DONORS FOR THEIR BLOOD BANKS, Fang added cynically.

That was true, too, but who could blame them? And, much as I disliked the blood banks, they were a whole lot better than the huge amounts of random fangings—and bloody deaths—we’d had in town before Alejandro started his Movement.

“There, you see?” Alejandro exclaimed. “Already you have helped us. You are just what we need.” He made a beckoning gesture. “Now come, I wish to introduce you to the rest of my family.”

I went to stand in front of the Christmas tree next to Alejandro, feeling strangely self-conscious with all eyes on me. Vampires of all shapes and sizes stared back at me. You’d think from seeing Alejandro and his lieutenants that all vamps were totally hot. Not so much. The ones staring . . . hungrily? . . . at me pretty much ran the gamut of human society.

“Furthermore,” Alejandro said, “I wish to use this occasion to have all of you reaffirm your oath to the Movement in the Slayer’s presence.”

Whoa. Tension suddenly filled the room at the mention of the “S” word. Why? Surely they’d all known what I was before this. Then the light dawned. He wanted me to read their minds while they swore undying allegiance.

Fang chuckled humorlessly. **YEAH. HE WANTS YOU TO FIND OUT IF HE HAS ANY MORE TRAITORS TO WORRY ABOUT.**

Oh, crap. No wonder they were upset. I mean, who liked to have their mind read? They had no way of knowing it wasn’t my thing, that I didn’t really enjoy mucking about in the dregs of a vampire’s mind. Besides, I could only do it when one tried to control me, and I only did it then to confirm the bloodsucker’s guilt or to protect myself and others . . . or apparently, when I was working for Alejandro.

Protests burst out around the room. Alejandro tried to calm them, but I tuned him out as a familiar sensation crept through me. Someone was trying to control me, someone named Jasper. Worse, he wanted both Alejandro and me dead . . . this very moment.

You two behind her—get her! someone yelled mentally.

I whipped two stakes out of my back waistband and whirled around, looking for the assailants. No one there. Were they in front?

I spun again to face the crowd, stakes at the ready. No one moved. What the hell?

The air took on a real tinge of unleashed danger as all those expressions sharpened and turned wary . . . and Jasper’s thoughts turned to triumph.

Oh, crap. He’d played me, and I’d gone and done the stupid thing he’d hoped for. I’d just threatened an entire vein of vampires with only my trusty hellhound for back-up.

We’re toast.

Try Me

CHAPTER TWO

“She’s attacking Alejandro,” someone yelled.

Three of them rushed me, moving inhumanly fast. Well, guess what? I was that fast, too. I jerked aside so the leading bloodsucker flew past and crashed into the Christmas tree. It fell, bulbs popping and glass icicles shattering. Fang jumped on him, snarling and biting.

The other two grabbed my arms to immobilize me. They yanked the stakes out of my hands, and I would have been cool if they’d stopped at disarming me. But when one of them bent and tried to fang me, I lost my temper. I jerked backward and brought my wrists together as hard as I could. They didn’t expect me to be as strong as they were, so their hold wasn’t as tight as it should have been. Their heads banged together and their surprise made them let go.

I whirled, looking for weapons, and saw that Austin had hold of the tree hugger. The tree! I grabbed an unbroken icicle decoration as the fanger rushed me and I lunged for his heart with my makeshift stake.

DON’T KILL HIM, Fang shouted in my mind.

It was almost too late, but I was able to deflect my aim and stab him in the shoulder instead. The rest of the crowd surged forward. Alejandro yelled, “Stop,” but some were too ticked off to listen.

Time to let Lola loose. My blood was already sizzling with lust for the hunt, so it was easy to call on my inner succubus. I reached down deep inside and yanked off the lid on the part of me I kept bottled up. Lola burst free, spilling out of me in a wave of lust to instantly enslave every male in the house. “Stop,” I yelled, echoing Alejandro.

TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH, Fang muttered.

Maybe, but using Lola was like using a grenade to squash a fly, and I hated pulling out all the stops unless it was absolutely necessary. Besides, I’d tried for so long to avoid using her that it wasn’t usually the first weapon that came to mind.

The men all obeyed immediately, seeing me as the ultimate woman, their goddess, their reason for being. Using the line of force that connected me to each man’s chakras like a puppet string, I pulled, they responded. I could make them dance any way I wanted them to. Kind of sickening, really.

Lola wanted to Hoover up that bounty of overflowing energy to fill up our chakras, but I stopped her. For one, it seemed like bad manners from an invited guest. For another, I couldn’t afford to be distracted. I still had the female vamps to contend with. After all, *they* weren’t affected by Lola.

The women had hesitated for a moment, but now a few of them shoved toward the front, my murder in their eyes.

I wasn't stupid enough to think they were less of a threat simply because they were female. I readied myself for action again, wondering if I could control all those strings while I fought. Probably not. Crap.

One of them lunged for me, but Rosa darted in front of me and shoved her back. Planting her hands on her hips, she said, "You heard Alejandro. He does not wish her harmed."

Oh, yeah, I still had her boss under control. I took a couple of moments to isolate the strings holding Alejandro and Austin and released them. They staggered for a moment then joined Rosa as a living shield.

Alejandro held up his hand, palm out. "Anyone who harms Ms. Shapiro will answer to me."

The women immediately froze in place.

"If you would release Luis . . . ?" he added.

I knew Alejandro trusted his lieutenants, which is why I'd released Austin, but Luis irritated me. I sighed inwardly and released the last of Alejandro's lieutenants from Lola's control. But I kept the rest. It would do them good to let them know what it felt like to be enthralled for a change.

Luis seemed royally ticked off, but just folded his arms and glared at me, then shifted his gaze to Alejandro, waiting for orders.

The women all waited, too, so Alejandro stepped aside to let them see me. "Perhaps you would explain why you drew weapons in my home?" He said it softly, but his steely gaze let me know the answer better be damned good.

"Someone tried to control me, made me think they were rushing me to kill both of us. But what he really wanted was for me to start a riot so I'd be torn to bloody bits."

A small smile flitted across Alejandro's face. "So you did exactly as he wished?"

I squirmed and glanced away. "Hey, the guy on the floor tried to bite me." Which, come to think of it, was pretty stupid on his part. Didn't he get the memo that drinking demon blood could make him crazy?

Unfortunately, I could tell from everyone's expressions that my reasoning sounded totally lame.

Fang hooted in my mind. DAMN SKIPPY.

I glared at him. *You're supposed to be on my side.*

I AM ON YOUR SIDE, BUT WHEN HE'S RIGHT, HE'S RIGHT. APOLOGIZE TO THE NICE MAN.

I sighed and decided to man up. Or was that woman up? Demon up? Whatever. "I'm sorry. It was kind of an instinctive reaction." After all, I'd been killing the nonaffiliated bloodsuckers—the ones not in the New Blood Movement—for years. I'd only started deliberately letting Lola loose as a weapon for about a month, so that skill didn't come as naturally. Muscle memory took over and had me pulling stake, which had been my go-to weapon as long as I could remember.

Alejandro gave me a slight bow, accepting my apology far more graciously than I'd given it. "And who tried to

control you?”

“I don’t know . . . only that his name was Jasper.” It wasn’t exactly a common name. Maybe there’d be only one.

Everyone turned to stare at the guy who’d led the rush and landed in the tree. He didn’t look so threatening now, with cuts on his face, bits of broken glass on his bad-ass leather clothing, and tinsel draping his shoulders. Not to mention that he was standing stock still, gazing at me as if I were Angelina Jolie and he desperately wanted to be Brad Pitt.

I glanced at Alejandro for direction, wondering what he wanted me to do about it.

“Please, ask him to answer my questions truthfully.”

I nodded. With Lola’s hooks into him, Jasper had to do anything I told him to. I ordered the guy to answer his leader’s questions honestly.

The vamp leader strolled over to his enthralled minion. “Why did you goad the Slayer, a guest in our home, deliberately?”

“Because she kills our kind. She killed Lily and you let her live.” He appeared confused, his true beliefs warring with how Lola now forced him to feel about me.

Rosa stepped forward, frowning and looking as though she was about to open a can of whup ass on his butt. Apparently she didn’t like anyone dissing her boss.

Alejandro stopped her with a raised hand. “Let him continue.” Turning back to Jasper, he asked, “What did you hope to gain?”

“The Slayer’s death.”

“Did you arrive at this plan on your own or did someone put you up to it?”

Jasper thought for a moment. “The three of us discussed it, but I wasn’t the one who came up with the idea. That was Neil.”

Rosa kicked the guy lying on the floor, who still adored me even with an icicle stuck in his shoulder.

Fang snickered. **THREE GUESSES WHO NEIL IS.**

“I’ll get to him in a moment,” Alejandro said. “Jasper, do you harbor evil thoughts in your heart? Do you seek to injure me or thwart the aims of the New Blood Movement?”

“No. I support you fully.”

Alejandro nodded. Turning to me, he said, “He is merely misguided. I suspect the real culprit lies elsewhere.” He glared down at Neil. “Get up.”

Neil didn’t move, so I ordered him through our link, “Do as he says.”

The enthralled vamp got to his feet, and Alejandro yanked the icicle out of his shoulder, tossing it aside. Neil gasped and swayed but Alejandro ignored his pain and nodded at me.

I loosened Lola's hold on Neil a little so he wouldn't seem so robotic. Let him dig his own grave. "Tell us everything you plotted and why," I told him.

Freed of inhibitions, Neil sneered at Alejandro. "You and your pansy ass Movement. We are superior to mere humans. United, we could take over the entire world. Yet you, you hold undreamed-of power and what do you do with it? You try to make *friends* with our food."

Whoa, harsh.

"Lily was the only one with guts enough to say the truth," Neil continued with a sneer, "but you let the Slayer kill her. She must die for that."

I thought we'd rooted out all of the members of her cabal, but we must have missed one.

Alejandro let him spew his venom for awhile, but when Neil changed to berating Alejandro for trying to partner with the Demon Underground and letting the spawn of Satan—that would be me—poison his mind and heart, Alejandro finally interrupted him. "Enough. What did you hope to accomplish?"

Forced to tell the truth in my thrall, Neil admitted, "That you and the Slayer would kill each other. That your loss would leave a vacuum of power."

Luis snorted in derision. "And you thought you could step in?"

"Why not? Austin doesn't want to lead, Rosa is nothing but a hanger-on, and no one in their right mind would follow *you*." He was almost panting now, though I wasn't sure if it was from the pain in his shoulder, or his rage. Probably both.

They all seemed taken aback at Neil's assessment. "You did ask for the truth," I reminded them. Oops. Maybe I shouldn't be agreeing with the raving vampire. Not a good idea to piss off the guys on your side. "At least, the truth as he sees it."

Fang chuckled. GOOD CATCH.

Alejandro shook his head, his expression sad. "You took an oath. An oath to honor the Movement, an oath to forego harming the humans who live alongside us." He sighed heavily. "With your actions and your attempt to bite a guest in my house, you are foresworn. And what is the punishment for that?"

"Death," Luis said, sounding overly pleased.

Alejandro nodded, looking as if a huge weight had just settled on his shoulders. He glanced at me. "Since the offense was to you, would you like to do the honors?"

Whoa. Act as his executioner? True, I was the Slayer and I'd killed a lot of evil bloodsuckers, but not like this.

When I hesitated, Alejandro pushed. “Your choice of weapon . . . stake, sword, or succubus?”

“He’s injured and unarmed,” I protested. Not to mention helpless in Lola’s clutches. He had to do anything I told him, so where was the fun in that? And while Lola leapt with excitement at the thought of sucking him dry, I’d never killed anyone that way and never would. If I went that far, I was afraid I’d lose the bigger, human part of myself.

“You tried to stake him earlier,” Austin reminded me. “We know you could have hit his heart. Why did you stab him in the shoulder instead?”

Now I was confused. Was Austin testing me? Not wanting to admit the dog made me do it, I said, “I didn’t think Alejandro would appreciate it.”

Austin nodded and smiled slightly as if I’d given the right answer.

“Then you refuse to execute him for me?” Alejandro asked.

He didn’t seem ticked off, so I tried to slide around it. “I’d rather not. Hey, if he rushes me again, no problem. But I don’t like staking the defenseless. And his offense was intended more for you than me.”

Alejandro smiled this time. Oh, good. Another right answer. Why didn’t they just pat me on the head and feed me my lines?

BECAUSE HE KNEW YOU’D DO FINE WITHOUT THEM, Fang said smugly.

Know it all.

The vamp leader bowed to me. “An excellent point. It is I who sentenced him. It is I who should mete out the punishment.”

Fang nodded approvingly. AS ALL GOOD LEADERS SHOULD.

With one swift movement, the vamp leader scooped up one of my stakes from the floor and slammed it into Neil’s chest. The traitor fell with a thud, and I felt the cord between us snap as he died—permanently this time. No one else made a sound. Alejandro turned to the crowd. “Is there anyone else who harbors evil intent, anyone who seeks to harm the Movement?”

“If so, uh, raise your hand,” I ordered. It wasn’t exactly how I’d planned to question them all, but it sure saved time.

No one moved.

Alejandro continued. “Do you reaffirm your oath to leave innocents unharmed, to take only the lifeblood that is freely offered, to abide by the tenets of the New Blood Movement, upon pain of death?”

“We do,” they chorused.

They’d pretty much already proved that, but people—even undead people—like the ceremonial stuff.

With a sigh, Alejandro said, "Release them, please, all but the other two who attacked you."

I nodded. "Give me a minute." It wasn't as easy as he made it out to be. Kind of like trying to remove a hook from a trout's mouth, with the added problem of trying not to draw blood. Or, in this case, not drawing out any lust that Lola could feed on.

I got a firm hold on Lola and released each invisible tentacle, one by one, holding on only to the two who'd rushed me. As the lines of force loosened and lay slack, I drew the invisible energy conduits back in to myself.

Alejandro spoke to his people from over the body of the dead traitor. "I thank you all for your confidence in me and your belief in the tenets of this Movement. For those who question why I invited the Slayer into our home, the answer is clear. She does not kill indiscriminately, nor does she take undue advantage of her great gifts, as she has demonstrated. Like us, she has honor." He glared out into the audience, daring anyone to contradict him. No one did. "Ms. Shapiro is contracted to me and will be in this house a great deal. I expect you all to treat her with the same respect you give me. Is that understood?"

They nodded and Alejandro inclined his head. "Thank you. Gentlemen, you may leave and go about your business. Ladies, please remain."

As they dispersed, I said awkwardly, "Uh, what about the other two who attacked me?" Lola still had them in her clutches.

Alejandro gave my attackers a dirty look. "They were led astray by lies. They do not deserve to die, but neither do they deserve to get off scot-free. If you wish, you may feed upon them."

Lola practically stood up and boogied, but I wasn't so sure.

When I hesitated too long, Austin drawled, "Please do. It'll make them think twice before doing something so darned bullheaded again."

Well, if Austin thought it was all right . . . I drew on the strings that connected me to the two of them, and let all that lustful energy flow into the deep wells of my body, filling them with the essence I craved so much yet tried to deny myself. I slurped up enough to keep Lola happy without draining them completely, then released them.

Once they regained their senses, they apologized profusely.

Alejandro, his expression cold, ordered, "Leave us. And take this mess with you." He gestured at the staked vamp on the floor.

Rosa stalked forward and swept her long dark hair out of her face. "They must clean up the rest of the mess, too." She flung out a hand toward the downed pine. "And redecorate the tree. Do you know how long it took me to get it just right?"

Alejandro suppressed a smile and nodded. "As she said. Rosa will supervise until you have it exactly to her liking."

The two vamps looked appalled, seeming more upset by this punishment than by Lola's caress or taking out dead

bodies.

IT'S A GUY THING, Val, Fang said. YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND.

You got that right. Men. Can't live with 'em; can't kill 'em. Mostly.

Rosa nodded in satisfaction as the men hauled Neil's body away.

Alejandro had me read the minds of all the women in the room, and I cleared them all. They were all worried about me learning their secrets, but who could keep them all straight? They all kind of blurred together after awhile, and I really didn't like wallowing in the muck of the vampire psyche anyway.

When we were done, I felt suddenly tired and hungry. Since the vamps didn't eat, they let me order in pizza, which I shared with Fang in the empty kitchen. That, plus the energy Lola had dragged out of the two who attacked me, helped to restore me fairly quickly.

After we ate, we rejoined Alejandro in his study, just the three of us. I slumped into one of the fancy wing-backed chairs in his very masculine study, all done up in earth tones, tile, and dark wood. The only thing I liked about this place was the mural on the wall opposite Alejandro's desk, depicting a sun-drenched landscape—a view from a villa on the Mediterranean.

“Okay,” I said bluntly, “they might buy that stuff about how noble I am and all that, but I don't. After all, I've killed many vamps and I could be lulling you into a false sense of security. Why *do* you trust me?”

Alejandro smiled from behind his mahogany desk. “You have a great deal of integrity.”

“You don't know that.” Heck, I wasn't even sure if I knew that or not. I was still learning things about myself all the time.

“Oh, but I do. You've proven it several times over. Also, do you remember the night I spoke to the Demon Underground, the night the *Encyclopedia Magicka* was stolen?”

“Of course.”

“I happened to brush up against a soothsayer demon that night.”

A what?

TESSA, Fang explained.

Prophecy girl?

YEAH, WELL, THE PREFERRED TERM IS SOOTHSAYER DEMON.

When the elfin-looking Tessa touched someone, she sometimes involuntarily spouted fortune cookie-type prophecies about their future. “Tessa gave you a prophecy?” At his nod, I asked, “What was it?”

“She said, ‘Lead with an honest heart by your side and you will achieve all that you desire.’”

Ooookay. “An honest heart’ could refer to anyone, like Austin or Rosa.”

“Perhaps, but a soothsayer’s prediction is never that straightforward. It is often couched with double meanings.”

I knew that. “Yeah, so?”

“So what is another word for heart?”

“I don’t know.” And why did it matter?

“Isn’t your full name *Valentine* Shapiro?”

Oh, crap. Had Tessa really told him I was the salvation of a vein of vampires? And why hadn’t she told *me*?

I gaped at Alejandro as he sat in the throne-like chair behind his massive wooden desk. No, I didn’t buy that I was the Movement’s savior. I couldn’t. “How can I possibly help the New Blood Movement?”

“You already have,” Alejandro pointed out, “by exposing traitors within our ranks.”

“Oh, good. Can I go now?”

I started to rise, but Alejandro halted me with a disappointed glance. “You know better than that. We have a contract.”

NICE TRY, Fang said.

I sighed. “Look, I know the contract said I’m supposed to assist you with your coming out plans, but I don’t get how I can do that. I have no political influence. I’m no party planner.”

“I have other people to do those things. All I really expect is to have you by my side for now, a talisman if you would.”

A freakin’ lucky charm? Did I *look* like a leprechaun?

Alejandro continued, “But it would help greatly if you could assist me in convincing the Demon Underground to reveal themselves to the general public at the same time we do.”

Shaking my head, I said, “You know I can’t do that. For one thing, I’m not sure any of them would listen to me. And, for another, that’s Micah’s decision. He’s the one you have to convince.” Thank goodness that wasn’t part of the contract.

“With your help, perhaps?” Alejandro suggested, raising one eyebrow.

I shook my head. “I don’t even know if I agree. I don’t get how it would help the demons. After all, the whole point of the Demon Underground is to help them pass as normal in human society.”

YEAH, Fang agreed. WE DON’T WANT ANY WITCH HUNTS HERE.

“But wouldn’t they rather be accepted as they are?” Alejandro persisted.

“That would be nice, but do you really think that’s gonna happen? ’Cause I sure don’t see it.”

“Not even if we announce our existence to the world during Christmas, the season of good will?”

AND THE SEASON WITH THE MOST SUICIDES

I nodded at Fang—he had a point. “What’s your hurry, anyway? After all, you can potentially live forever.”

“Yes, but the Movement cannot support new members without a continuous stream of donors at our blood banks to provide the sustenance we need. With the backing of some key political leaders we have *now*, we must use this time before another election occurs. And with the legislation we plan to put in place, vampires belonging to the Movement will be protected while those who don’t will be outcast. It will be far more difficult for the unaffiliated to get away with their attacks on humans.”

Okay, saving the human race was a good reason, but—

The door opened and Rosa stuck her head in the study. “Micah Blackburn is here to see you.”

Alejandro nodded. “Send him in, please.”

My cousin—by demon powers though not by blood—came in, and Alejandro waved him to a seat. Micah came right to the point. “As we agreed, I have Josh and Andrew here to start their punishment. They’re waiting in the car.”

Lucky for them, Alejandro had recognized the demons had been influenced by their grief and the dark magicks in the *Encyclopedia Magioka* when they attacked the Movement. So instead of calling for their blood, he’d agreed to let them work off their debt to his organization.

Alejandro nodded. “Have you made any progress in learning where the fire demon hid the books?”

Micah sighed heavily. “Not yet. We’ve tried everything we can think of to get the information. The books somehow erased or magically protected his memory of where he hid them.” Micah shook his head. “All we really know is that they’re in San Antonio somewhere. Andrew didn’t have time to take them anywhere else, and he definitely remembers putting them somewhere safe, not mailing them.”

Apparently, when the books didn’t want to be found, they made sure of it. The question was, why didn’t they want to be found? I’d had them for years. Why hide now?

I couldn’t answer those questions, so I asked Alejandro, “What are you going to have Josh and Andrew do?”

“I thought I’d put them under the supervision of one of my lieutenants. Luis.”

Now that was true punishment. How diabolical.

“That takes care of the boys,” he continued, “but I am wondering about the books. They are too dangerous to leave lying around for anyone to find. You had them for a long time, did you not, Ms. Shapiro?”

I nodded.

“And you had no problem with them trying to control you. Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t think anyone does.”

“Maybe there’s one who does,” Micah corrected me.

News to me. “Who?”

“Someone showed up a few hours ago from the Demon Underground in Los Angeles. He felt the books wake up and came to warn us about them.”

JUST A TAD TOO LATE, Fang snarked.

My thoughts exactly.

Micah continued, “He claims to be an expert on them. I thought we might all want to speak to him, so he’s waiting in the other room.”

“Then let us bring him in,” Alejandro said. He stuck his head out the wooden door that could have belonged to some ancient castle and asked Rosa to fetch the so-called expert.

Rosa had an amused smile on her face as she showed the guy in. Slim with nicely defined muscles, he was styled to the nth degree with a casually chic fitted jacket over a tight white T-shirt and jeans. With his carefully moussed and highlighted hair, tasteful earring, and just the right amount of sexy beard stubble, he appeared as if he’d just stepped out of a Calvin Klein ad. He even made Alejandro seem slightly shabby in comparison.

So that’s what metrosexual looked like

Fang snorted.

Alejandro told Rosa she could go, and the pretty boy smoothed his hair back. He gave her a smoldering glance as she left, as if rewarding her with a prize. Strange. I’d never seen a non-vamp so . . . comfortable around the undead.

Fang laid down and put his head on his paws, sighing in disgust. CAN YOU SAY NARCISSIST?

True, but I had to admit the guy was great eye candy.

“This is Trevor Jackson,” Micah said, then introduced the rest of us and gestured Trevor to one of the leather wing-backed chairs.

The guy sat gracefully, appearing oh-so-casual as he adjusted his jacket just so. “Call me Trevor.” He smiled lazily but his voice had an edge to it. “I’m the keeper of the *Encyclopedia Magick* and I’ve come to take it back where it belongs.”

CHAPTER THREE

I choked back a laugh. Pretty boy was trying to tell the leader of the two most powerful organizations in San Antonio what to do? Either the guy was stupid or he had more guts than I gave him credit for. What was he, anyway? Some kind of fashion demon?

Fang chuckled in my mind. NO SUCH THING, BABE.

Then what is he?

Fang tensed beside me. I DON'T KNOW. I CAN'T READ HIS MIND.

Whoa. That was a first. If Fang couldn't read his mind, then . . . "Are you human, Trevor?" I blurted out.

Trevor appeared miffed at having his big announcement interrupted. "No, or Micah wouldn't have brought me here."

"Tessa checked his credentials," Micah confirmed.

I wanted to ask Trevor point-blank what kind of demon he was, but that wasn't considered good manners in the Demon Underground. There was no rule about asking other rude questions, though. So far as I knew.

"So why can't my hellhound read you?" I asked bluntly.

Trevor shrugged. "Part of my training is to learn how to protect my mind from intrusion." His dismissive gaze skimmed Alejandro and Fang, the two who might have been able to worm some secrets out of him.

"Really? Do you have something to hide?" I asked.

LIKE WHAT? THE SECRET OF WHAT'S GOING TO BE SHOWING ON THE RUNWAY NEXT SEASON? Fang drawled.

"The training is so I can keep the books out of my mind," Trevor explained. "So they can't control me. That is why I am their proper keeper. Trust me, you don't *want* them on the loose in your city."

Something didn't ring true. I turned to Micah. "I had them for thirteen years, and your father had them before that. How long?"

"I'm not sure," he said, glancing speculatively at Trevor. "Ever since I can remember."

Alejandro raised an eyebrow and voiced what the rest of us were thinking. "You do not appear old enough to have

had custody of such important magickal artifacts before they came to Micah's father."

Something flickered in Trevor's eyes, but I wasn't sure what. Annoyance? Embarrassment? He shrugged, trying to look sheepish but not quite pulling it off. "My father was keeper before me," he admitted. "He lost them and trained me to take his place in case they ever appeared again."

"So you've never actually been a keeper?" I persisted.

"I am fully trained, I assure you. I've been studying them all my life. That's how I knew when they woke here in San Antonio."

"Does that mean you can sense them now?"

"Afraid not. They're hiding." His smile was lazy, his eyes hooded. Unexpectedly sexy. I bet he got a lot of mileage out of that calculated smile.

Fang poked me with his nose. DON'T LET IT WORK ON YOU.

Not a problem. He's not my type. He liked himself too much. But I had to admit watching him was entertaining.

Alejandro raised an imperious finger from behind his desk to gain Trevor's attention. "Earlier, you stated that we would not want them loose in San Antonio. Why is that?"

He shrugged. "I suspect you figured that out for yourselves when they woke."

Micah and Alejandro exchanged a look I couldn't interpret.

"Do they always try to control people?" Micah asked.

"Usually. It's why they need a keeper."

Micah glanced at me. I took the hint. "But I had them for many years and they didn't try to control me," I told Trevor.

He raised an eyebrow. "Didn't they?"

That took me aback for a moment. Had they controlled my actions without my knowledge? What a disturbing thought.

No, wait. Josh and Andrew said the books had spoken to them. I didn't remember anything like that. More confident, I said, "No, they didn't. They never spoke to me, never tried to get me to do anything at all."

His brow furrowed in puzzlement and he asked, "Did you read them? Did you try any of the spells?"

"Uh, I just read the first volume that explained about all the different kinds of supernatural creatures. I didn't try any spells." They must have been in the last two volumes. I'd glanced through them, but wasn't interested in the mumbo jumbo stuff.

He nodded as if his suspicions were confirmed. “That explains it.”

“Can you prove you’re the keeper?” Micah asked. He obviously wanted to keep the books and didn’t want to think his father had anything to do with stealing them.

“Absolutely,” Trevor confirmed. “When we find the encyclopedia.”

“Can you track them?” I asked eagerly. The sooner we found the books—no matter who kept them—the sooner I could get out of my contract with Alejandro.

“Only when they’re actively trying to control someone. When they’re not, I can’t sense them at all.”

“Then how do you expect to find them?” Alejandro asked. I’d expected him to be impatient by now, but he merely seemed curious.

Trevor shrugged, looking rueful. “I can only hope they reveal themselves by trying to manipulate someone else. And if I get within five hundred feet of them, I’ll be able to sense them even if they’re hiding.”

That would be handy.

“And once you find them?” Alejandro persisted.

“I’ll be able to control them,” Trevor said with confidence.

“How?” Micah asked.

A corner of Trevor’s mouth quirked up. “I’m afraid that’s a trade secret. Too many people want to possess the *Encyclopedia Magicka* for, er, nefarious purposes. You understand.”

Clearly, Micah didn’t. “And how do we know your purposes aren’t nefarious?”

“Because I’m a keeper,” Trevor said, as if that explained everything. “You know where they were last, and some of you had contact with them. I’m hoping I can learn something that will help me find them.” Trevor paused. “And since you so obviously want to find the books yourselves, can you tell *me* why?”

Alejandro scowled. “They were used against members of the New Blood Movement. I do not wish this to ever happen again.”

“Ah, yes, Micah explained your Movement to me. I would be happy to remove them from San Antonio for you. And you?” Trevor asked Micah.

“They have a lot of knowledge about the abilities of our own people that the Demon Underground can use. It’s an invaluable resource for understanding ourselves.”

Before he could ask me, I said, “I just want to help Micah and Alejandro.” Not to mention complete that contract so I’d be free.

Trevor nodded. “I think we can work something out with the Underground here. With your knowledge of their

recent whereabouts and my ability to find them, we'd be better off pooling our efforts to find the books." He glanced between the two leaders who still looked uncertain. "Why don't I leave you to talk about it?" He took a business card out of his pocket and slid it across the scarred surface of the old wooden desk to Alejandro. "You can reach me at this number." He paused, giving us a charming smile. "If you wouldn't mind providing me a ride back to where I'm staying?"

Alejandro nodded. "One of my people will drive you."

Cocking his head with a slight grin, Trevor murmured, "Would it be possible to have the charming Rosa?"

"Of course," Alejandro said smoothly and left to get his lieutenant.

While he waited, Trevor shook Micah's hand and murmured some pleasantries, then crossed the room to shake mine. Lola didn't seem at all interested in him, but I urged her to enthrall him . . . just a little. Maybe if he was feeling a little happy, he'd be more willing to share what he knew.

Nothing. *Nada*. Zilch. It was like trying to get lust from a stone.

His eyes widened and he placed his other hand on top of mine. "Oh my, a little succubus. I would never have guessed."

What the hell did that mean? I yanked my hand out of his, wishing I could come up with a great line that would skewer him and his amusement, but my mind went blank. *Help me here*, I begged Fang.

SORRY, BABE. I GOT NOTHIN'.

Too late anyway as Alejandro came back in with Rosa. Trevor's eyes gleamed in appreciation as he looked her over. For some reason, it annoyed me.

Fang huffed. WHY DO YOU CARE WHAT HE THINKS, ANYWAY?

I don't, personally. But he should have responded to Lola and thought *she* was all that. Why hadn't he?

Alejandro closed the door and the three of us looked at each other. Micah spoke first. "I don't trust him."

"Nor do I," Alejandro said. "But I think we must work with him in order to locate the encyclopedia. I would like it found before we announce our existence to the world, if at all possible." He glanced at me. "I would like you to assist him, Ms. Shapiro. Accompany him on his search."

Somehow I knew that was coming. I grimaced, but nodded.

Micah added, "I noticed you used your gift on him, Val. How did it work?"

"It didn't. I guess the same shield that kept Fang out of his mind kept Lola out of his chakras. He could feel Lola, but Lola couldn't feel him."

"I was not able to penetrate it either," Alejandro said. "That shield would be a very useful thing to have. If it would keep humans from being enthralled by my kind, they would feel safer, more likely to respond positively to our coming

out. Perhaps you could persuade him to give you the secret of it.”

I shrugged. “I doubt it. Rosa is more likely to get something from him.”

“Perhaps,” Alejandro conceded. “She will call when she drops him off. Let’s see what happens then.”

While we waited, they discussed the Movement’s coming out, Alejandro politely pressing Micah to join them, and Micah just as politely refusing. Way too civilized for me.

When Rosa called, Alejandro talked to her then hung up and said, “She didn’t learn any more from him, except that he has rented a condo nearby.”

Not a hotel? Dang. “That probably means he thinks it’ll take a long time to find the books,” I said. More time to spend with the self-absorbed demon. Great.

Micah frowned. “You’re right. Val, I’m not sure it’s safe for you. If your powers don’t work on him . . . “

“No problem, cuz. As long as I have my strength and power, I’m good.”

SO LONG AS YOU AND SHADE DON’T HOOK UP, THAT IS. Strangely, that thought from Fang didn’t come out snarky. Instead, his furry little brow wrinkled in concern.

And he must have broadcast it to the other two also, because Micah said, “Fang’s right. Until this guy leaves, maybe you and Shade—”

I cut him off with a gesture. I soooo did not want to discuss my love life here. Not only was it embarrassing, it was none of their business. “Don’t worry about me,” I snapped. “I can control myself . . . and Lola.”

Alejandro glanced back and forth between us, looking curious. “What is it that you and Shade should not do?”

Crap. I’d forgotten he didn’t know. Apparently, so had Fang because he licked my hand in apology. As I hid my face behind my hand and stared at the plush blood-red rug, Micah explained the whole lose-your-virginity-lose-your-strength bit to the vampire leader.

Could this possibly get any more embarrassing?

Apparently, it could. Alejandro cleared his throat and said, “Ms. Shapiro, I find myself in the regrettable position of having to echo Mr. Blackburn’s sentiments. If you would kindly refrain from—”

“I already said I would,” I bit out. “Sheesh, it’s not like we’re horn dogs or anything.” Jeez, even if I did do the deed, it wasn’t like I’d be helpless—I’d still have the powers of your normal, average non-virgin succubus—no strength or accelerating healing, but plenty of ability to cloud men’s minds. “Can we change the subject, please?”

Alejandro looked concerned, but nodded. “Let me call Mr. Jackson to confirm we would like to work with him.” He dialed and held a brief conversation, then handed the phone to me. “Mr. Jackson would like to set up a time for you two to meet.”

I took the phone and asked Trevor, “Where?”

“I don’t know San Antonio very well, but I do know where Alejandro and Rosa live. Why don’t I get some sleep to get rid of the jet lag, then meet you back there first thing in the morning?”

“I usually work midnight to dawn, but I can meet you outside the mansion after I get off.” I didn’t really need that much sleep.

Trevor hesitated, then said, “Okay. Dawn it is.”

“You got it.”

We hung up and I handed Alejandro his phone back, saying, “We meet here at dawn tomorrow.”

“Good,” Micah said and stood. “If you don’t mind, I’ll send Josh and Andrew in, then take off. I’m needed at the club.”

I didn’t doubt it. Micah ran the popular Club Purgatory down on the River Walk. Not only was it a great place to employ the more obvious demons in the Purgatory theme of the club, it brought in quite a bit of money. It should be hopping at this time of night.

After Micah scratched Fang behind his ears and left, Alejandro gave me an approving nod. “An excellent arrangement with Mr. Jackson. Though this is not how I planned to use your services, it will do almost as well.”

“How *did* you plan to use me?” I asked, curious.

He played with a pen on his desk for a moment, then said, “We strive for acceptance, not fear. Therefore, before we announce our existence to the world, I would like to . . . deter . . . the unaffiliated of my kind from causing any trouble that would put us in a bad light.”

HE MEANS HE WANTS YOU TO HELP HIM KILL THEM, Fang said.

Yeab, I got that. He wanted to make it too miserable for them to continue attacking humans. I definitely approved. “Okay, I’ll do that, whenever Trevor and I aren’t searching for the books. In fact, we have the rest of the night left, so why don’t we go kick some bad vamp butt?”

Fang scrambled to his feet and yipped to show his approval. I’M IN!

CHAPTER FOUR

Before we could go hunt fangbangers, the doorbell rang—Josh and Andrew, no doubt. When Alejandro didn't move from the throne-like chair behind his desk, I said, "Uh, are your people gonna be cool with having the two demons here who hurt—"

Before I could finish, he was up and out of his chair, and down the hall with his lightning-fast speed. I hoofed it after him, glad to see that most of the bloodsuckers had left. Only the three lieutenants and a few others remained in the great room, cleaning up the mess. Luis had his hand on the door handle but Alejandro stopped him with a word. They whispered for a little bit, then Alejandro opened the ancient-looking wooden door.

Sure enough, Josh and Andrew stood there, looking more than a little apprehensive. Ludwig, the massive water demon, loomed behind them. Since Ludwig had saved the mansion when the redheaded fire demon tried to burn it down, and was humongous enough to make anyone think twice about attacking him, he was a good choice to escort them. Good—Micah had been thinking.

Alejandro stared sternly at the two.

Andrew looked sullen, but Josh had turned white under his wavy blond hair. I feared he'd phase out right there, but Ludwig had a firm grip on him so he couldn't.

Luis, of course, wore a sneer, though whatever his boss had told him must have him in check.

"Has it been explained what we require of you?" Alejandro asked the demons.

They nodded.

"Good. You will be under Luis's direction. Tonight, you will accompany him and Ms. Shapiro to assess the vulnerability of the blood banks. You must do exactly as he says, do you understand?"

They both jumped as if they'd received an electric shock and stared at Luis as if he were evil incarnate. What was that all about?

Fang chuckled. **LUIS JUST ENTHRALLED THEM AND SHOWED THEM WHAT HE COULD DO IF THEY SCREWED UP.**

I hid a grin. Luis had his uses. But I wasn't thrilled about going hunting with him and two newbies. I'd have to watch out for them as well as myself.

Ludwig frowned and glanced between the demons and the vamps, not letting go of Josh. He didn't have a hell-

hound explaining what was going on, so he must be confused.

“I’ll take care of them,” I told him.

Apparently reassured, the man mountain nodded and left.

Andrew stuck his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. “Now what?”

Luis’s lips spread into a smile . . . and it wasn’t a pleasant one. With his dark goatee, long hair clubbed back into a ponytail, and slashing eyebrows, he appeared really sinister. “Now you do exactly as you are told.” He gestured toward the string of dark luxury automobiles Alejandro kept lined up on the long driveway. “We shall take one of the cars.”

We followed him to the last one. “Whoa, what’s this?” Andrew asked, running his hand over the gleaming black finish. Apparently, he liked shiny things.

“A Lincoln town car,” Luis said with pride. “Top of the line, of course.” He opened the door and the two miscreants piled in the back seat as I got in the front.

Fang jumped up to curl in my lap. I’M GONNA TAKE A NAP. WAKE ME WHEN WE GET THERE.

The warm weight of him was nice, comforting. As the guys talked cars, I zoned out and stroked Fang’s wiry fur. The hellhound pretended to be gruff and macho, but he enjoyed the petting as much as I did. He just wouldn’t admit it.

Fang opened one eye. CAN YOU STOP THINKING SO LOUD? I’M TRYING TO SLEEP HERE.

Then stop listening.

He pointedly put a paw over his ear. Okay, I got the message. Unfortunately, being left alone with my own thoughts meant returning to the one thing that had been spinning through my brain ever since I’d learned what losing my virginity would really mean.

It wasn’t an easy decision. I mean, sure, it was a huge deal for anyone, but in my case, doing the deed meant the Slayer would no longer have the ability to slay. My reflexes would slow and so would my speed and healing.

All my life, I had longed to be normal like my half-sister Jen . . . not to have to worry about accidentally turning men on by getting too close, not to be treated like a freak by the full human side of my family. But now that I faced being normal, I still kind of wanted that, but I kind of didn’t, too. It was part of me, what I’d always known.

Things had changed. The Demon Underground proved there were others like me, others who understood what I was going through or at least valued me for my abilities. Plus, those same abilities gave me respect from the humans in the Special Crimes Unit. My demon side made me special . . . maybe I wasn’t as big a freak as I thought after all.

But how special would I be if all I could do was make men lust over me, once I lost the slaying ability that had defined me for so long? Women all over the world could make men lust—not like it was that hard. And how

about when the vamps learned I was no longer as powerful? Would they come after me? Would I have to leave San Antonio, the city I loved?

It was a depressing thought, but the alternative wasn't much better. To keep my slaying ability, I had to keep my virginity. That hadn't been an issue so far, but with Shade letting Lola feed on him whenever she needed it, I was afraid it would only be a matter of time before something irreversible happened. Especially since Shade was so totally hot.

Sure, he had a dark side. Shadow demons acted as conduits between our world and other dimensions. If Shade got too angry or lost control of his demon side, all hell could break loose. Literally. Demons on the other side could seize control and pour through into our world.

But Shade was such a white hat he'd rather kill himself than let that happen. Luckily, I seemed to be able to keep his demon under control while he kept Lola happy. It's as if we were meant for each other.

Cue sappy music here.

Yeah, it was pretty inevitable that we'd hook up eventually, but I wanted to be able to choose *when*. While I still worked for Alejandro, not such a good idea. And if I lost my powers, I'd have to find a new job, too. I wouldn't be much use to the Special Crimes Unit then. I'd still be able to enthrall men, but I'd never really liked using my succubus powers. And if I let Lola have her way too much, she might take over completely.

If I did lose my strength, what would life be like? Though Micah was an incubus, he got along fine without the extras, but being a guy, he'd lost his cherry way early and never knew what powers he'd lost along with his virginity.

Also, if I did the deed, would it be worth it? Would Shade even stick around? Look what had happened with Dan and me. Would it all be for nothing?

Lots of questions. No answers. Not good ones, anyway.

I sighed. For now, it would be best to stay away from Shade as much as I could. Fighting vamps seemed to satisfy my demon's lust. With any luck, we'd find some to whale on tonight.

We arrived at the old brick hotel that had been converted into a blood bank, and Luis parked in the back. I'd been here before, but not through the back way. Luis got us in easily past the security cameras and fancy intrusion detection system and headed for the elevator.

"Why are we going upstairs?" I asked. The bad guys would be downstairs or outside.

He pressed the elevator button. "To give these pups some way of defending themselves," he said, raking them with a look that said he considered them pond scum. Or worse—a greasy layer below pond scum.

He used a key card to take us to the fourth floor, to the penthouse executive suite. I'd never thought about it before, but I wondered what was on the second and third floors. Probably where the other members of the Movement slept during the day, since they obviously didn't all stay at the mansion.

Made sense. No wonder most of the blood banks were converted hotels.

FOCUS, VAL, FOCUS, Fang reminded me.

Yeah, I needed to do that. But when Luis led us into the “living room,” it was hard to focus on anything but the décor. It wasn’t something I’d ever choose. Brilliant white contrasted with dead black. Add splashes of blood red and hard angles, and the room screamed modern design.

Strange—it was so different from Alejandro’s warm, comfortable home. This was where the vamp leader had brought me the first time we met, so I gathered it was how he chose to show his public face. What message was he trying to portray? It was as if he’d taken the Hollywood vamp stereotype and aggressively brought it into the twenty-first century.

I felt uneasy here—which could be the point—but Josh and Andrew seemed impressed by it all. Or maybe they were wowed by the state-of-the-art electronics everywhere. Luis seemed really comfortable here, which was strange. It didn’t appear to be the kind of place a Spanish aristocrat would like. At least, that’s what I’d always assumed he’d been when he was alive. He sure had the attitude.

IT SUITS HIS PERSONALITY, Fang muttered. COLD AND LIFELESS.

“Stay here,” Luis ordered. “I’ll be right back.”

He returned quickly, carrying a couple of crossbows and some stakes.

“Whoa, dude,” I exclaimed. “What are you doing with vampire-slaying equipment?”

His lips stretched in a thin smile. “We took them off some would-be slayers who couldn’t tell the difference between the people of the Movement and the filth who prey on the weak.”

Josh and Andrew seemed impressed by his passion, so I didn’t ask him how long he’d been one of the filth before he joined Alejandro.

Luis added, “Lately, it has become necessary to arm our volunteers and customers occasionally when the dregs come calling.”

That seemed dangerous, but I guess he could compel them not to use those weapons on his own undead body.

TOO BAD, Fang muttered.

Yeah, Luis didn’t exactly endear himself to anyone. Except maybe Alejandro.

Luis led us to an area in the back that resembled a gym or training room, with padded blue mats lining the walls and floors. He showed the guys how to use the crossbows and let them practice a few times. They did surprisingly well. I gave them a few pointers on how to use the stakes and avoid a fanging, but they were nowhere near ready to go *mano-a-mano* with angry fangbangers.

Luis knew it, too. “These are a last resort only,” he told them. “If a rogue vampire or gang attacks the blood bank tonight, you are to observe only. Use these weapons only to protect humans. Do you understand?”

Josh and Andrew nodded soberly, but I didn’t trust the gleam in their eyes.

“Use it only if one of them attacks you first,” I added. Didn’t want them going off half-cocked and shooting one of the good guys. “Oh, and one more thing. Micah still wants to keep the Underground secret, so don’t even think about using your powers in public or you’ll have a whole boatload of pissed-off demons to deal with. Got it?”

Andrew scowled, but I didn’t relax my glare until they both nodded.

“So what do we do now?” Josh asked. “Patrol?”

Luis shook his head. “Too obvious. We don’t want to scare them away. We want them to feel safe enough to strike, so we can try to reason with them.” But from the way he hefted the stake in his hand, I wasn’t sure he thought mere talking would be enough.

“You expect them here tonight?” I asked.

Luis nodded. “It fits their pattern. We have warned most of our regular customers away, but will need someone to lure them in. Many of them know the Slayer, so . . .” He turned a speculative gaze on Josh and Andrew.

“You want to use us as bait?” Andrew asked in disbelief.

“One of you,” Luis said. “Him.” He pointed at Josh.

It made a lot of sense. If Josh knew they were coming, he could phase out before they grabbed him. And he was slighter, looking less likely to fight back than the stocky redheaded fire demon.

Josh gulped visibly. “But what if one of them grabs me before I can phase? I can’t phase when someone is holding onto me.” He sounded on the edge of panic.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him. “We’ll be watching you and won’t let you get hurt.”

NOT MUCH, ANYWAY.

When Josh paled even more, I realized Fang must have shared his thought with the demon. I glared at the hellhound who acted as if he had nothing on his innocent little mind except for scratching his ear. *You’re not helping.* Aloud, I added to Josh, “You know better than anyone that if one tries to bite you, they’ll regret it. Remember, vamp drink demon blood, vamp go crazy.” That’s what had gotten Josh into trouble in the first place.

“That’s settled then,” Luis said, though Josh didn’t look as though he thought it was settled at all. “Their normal method of operation is to have two or three band together to attack someone alone on the street outside, then drain them almost completely and dump them at the door before anyone can raise an alarm.” He shook his head. “We’ve been able to get some of the victims to the hospital in time or replenished their blood with our own supply, but it’s not enough.”

From the grit in his tone, I figured he wasn't happy that the unaffiliated ones thumbed their noses at the Movement in this way.

Luis glared at Josh and Andrew. "And thanks to you, our supplies are way down."

Andrew backed off, holding his hands up. "Whoa, not me, dude. All I did was try to burn your house down."

Stupid to remind us. Luis's eyes narrowed, but before he could ream the fire demon a new one, I said, "So what's the plan? Throw Josh out as bait and watch in the shadows to see if we can reel in some bottom feeders?"

"Indeed," Luis agreed. "Though they will suspect something if they sense anyone else on the street. We shall wait in the lobby."

Josh's brow furrowed. "Then how will you know if I'm in trouble?"

"I shall enthrall you lightly and remain in your mind the whole time," Luis said.

"Huh? No way, dude." Josh backed off, holding his hands out as if to ward off the vampire.

"Then what do you suggest?" Luis bit out. "Would you rather the succubus enslave you?"

Whoa—I so didn't want to go there. I stepped in. "How about if Fang keeps tabs on you, Josh? He's read you before and can alert me right away if you're in danger. Fang, you can do that, right?"

YOU KNOW I CAN.

Yeab, but I want you to reassure Josh.

As Josh hesitated, Fang broadcast, YOU KNOW I'LL TAKE CARE OF YOU, OR SHADE WON'T LET ME SEE PRINCESS ANYMORE. IT'S ME OR HIM, BUDDY. WHO'S IT GONNA BE?

"Okay, okay," Josh said. "Fang can watch out for me."

And Fang did as Josh wandered the streets for a couple of hours without a nibble, careful not to go beyond Fang's range. The rest of us hung out in the lobby, watching customers come and go. Most who did arrived in a group or were escorted by a member of the Movement and wore large silver crosses until they got inside.

Though the Movement gave the option of donating blood in a sterile location downstairs, the vast majority of these nighttime visitors chose the other—far more personal—method of donating. It made sense. The other kind of donation could be given during the day. Since the up close and personal kind required fang to neck, the sun had to be down. Unfortunately, that meant the bad vamps were out and about as well. But since the "customers" got a thrill along with the donation, a lot of them were willing to risk it. I bet some of them were becoming addicts. Would we soon see Fangees Anonymous forming here in town?

My musings were cut short as Fang alerted us that Josh had spotted someone tailing him. I didn't get too excited since we'd already had a couple of false alarms. One was a stray dog and the other some blood bank customers. But we moved toward the door just in case. Not too fast—we didn't want to spook the customers—but to

be there in case Josh needed us.

IT'S THEM, Fang confirmed, and we all charged out into the street.

Lust for the hunt sizzled in my blood. As we burst outside, I saw four vamps chasing Josh toward the blood bank. One reached for him and Andrew yelled, "Phase, now!"

Josh went transparent for a moment and the vamp's hand went right through him.

"Here," Andrew shouted again, "I have your weapon."

Josh continued his rush through a parked car. Two of his pursuers crashed into it. The other two swerved in time and came around it—smack into Luis and me. I was ready with a stake and plunged it into one's heart. He fell like a rock. Luis scuffled with the other one so I looked back to check on Josh and Andrew.

They had their backs against the brick wall and were scrambling to arm their crossbows. Fang had jumped protectively in front of them, bared his fangs and growled, his eyes flashing purple. He was actually holding the two bloodsuckers at bay. I took a running leap and tackled one of them. He slammed into his buddy, taking them both down. Bowling for vampires, anyone?

I fumbled for a stake as the two unwashed dead fought to get out from under me. Sheesh, it smelled like they hadn't bathed for a month. Phew!

Uh oh. All that writhing woke Lola up, and they were inside my energy field, which meant I didn't even have to try to make them want me. The male vamps suddenly seemed far more interested in holding on to me than in fighting me off. Ick. Was one of them seriously trying to hump my leg?

Forget using Lola to tame them. I didn't want their smelly energy anywhere near me. I jumped off of them, feeling as though I'd been slimed. Now I was able to grab another stake from my back waistband. I slammed it toward the one who'd been humping my leg. He rolled to the side. Missed. I hit his buddy in the thigh instead. He screamed and Fang lunged for his crotch. The stabbed vamp's scream took on a higher pitch and he curled up into a ball. That ought to keep him out of action for a bit.

His friend scrambled to his feet, looking royally pissed, and flashed his fangs at me. Something slugged me on my left side, making me stagger forward a step. Searing pain followed shortly after, but I couldn't deal with that right now. The standing vamp rushed me and I stepped aside. He missed me, slamming into the parked car. I heard something whoosh past me—a fireball! It hit the vamp right in the chest and he went up in flames, screaming. Luckily, he fell on the sidewalk instead of against the gas tank, and thrashed in agony until he died.

Barbecued vamp . . . not a nice smell. And a sucky way to die.

I turned to see a pale and horrified Josh and Andrew staring at the three undead who were definitely *dead* now. Not a pretty sight since Luis had twisted the head off of his opponent. He now held the last one standing—the one I'd bowled over—pinned to the wall by his throat. The stake was still in the vamp's thigh and his crotch probably hurt like hell, judging by his whimpering.

Luis whispered fiercely into his ear. “The Movement and the Slayer will no longer tolerate your harassment and killing of humans for sustenance. From now on, we cry war against all of the unaffiliated. Join us or die.”

The vamp, who seemed to be no more than twenty years old, gaped at me in horror. Though my side was hurting like a son of a gun, I tried to come across as all mean and slayerish.

“I didn’t know,” the vamp sobbed. “I didn’t know.”

Luis flung him away in disgust and yanked the stake out of his thigh. “Go, tell the others. As for you, if we hear of you attacking anyone again, we will hunt you down, and your ending will make these deaths look like a walk in the park. Got it?”

The vamp gave a jerky nod. “Okay. I-I’ll join tomorrow. Right after I tell everyone else.”

“You do that,” I said sternly as he hobbled away on his injured leg as fast as he could.

Fang came to stand beside me, his tongue lolling in amusement. *YOU DO THAT? WOW, GREAT LINE.*

Ob, shut up. It was the best I’d been able to come up with, considering the pain in my side. Speaking of pain, I glanced down and saw that a crossbow bolt had pierced the outer edge of the skin above my hip and was sticking out both in the back and the front. Crap.

I turned to glare at the two demons. The first time I’d been really injured . . . and I’d been shot by my *own side?*

“It was an accident, I swear,” Josh said, his crossbow on the ground and his hands held out as if to ward me off. “I was aiming at the vampire.”

Luis’s reply almost sounded like a growl. “Didn’t we tell you two to use those weapons only as a last resort?”

“Yes, but there were two of them and Val—”

“Val had them under control,” I said. “And see what you did? You shot me!”

Luis glared at Andrew. “And *you* were told not to use your powers.”

Andrew lifted his chin defiantly. “I killed him, didn’t I?”

“You do as you’re told!” Luis slapped Andrew, hard, and for some reason, that shocked me more than anything else that had happened this evening.

But it reminded me that he could have done much worse if he wanted to. And, it apparently did the same thing for the two demons, because their eyes widened and they paled even more.

Bet they were really sorry they hadn’t listened.

YEAH, Fang snickered. LUIS PUT THEM IN DEMON TIME-OUT.

“Stay here,” Luis ordered. “I will do damage control, to clear the minds of any who witnessed this.”

Sure enough, there were horrified lookie-loos staring out of the blood bank and cruising down the street.

“I’m so sorry,” Josh said. “It won’t happen again, I swear.” He seemed to be genuinely apologetic.

HE IS, Fang confirmed. YOU’RE HIS NEW HERO.

Hub?

Fang chuckled. HE’S GOT THIS IMAGE OF YOU IN HIS MIND, STANDING LIKE A FEARLESS GUNSLINGER WITH AN ARROW IN YOUR SIDE, HALOED BY THE STREETLIGHT, FACING DOWN THE EVIL BLOODSUCKERS. ANDREW, TOO.

Oh, great. Groupies. “So, what are we going to do about getting this thing out of me?” I took off my vest and carefully peeled away the shirt around the wound, wincing as the cloth brushed against the short bolt. It had caught only about an inch of my skin so nothing vital was hit, but it hurt like hell, especially now that the adrenaline was wearing off. Luckily, it didn’t have any barbs on the pointy end, or it would have done a lot more damage.

“Sorry,” Andrew muttered. “Does it hurt?”

Duh. “Oh, no, I’m good,” I said, not bothering to hide my sarcasm. “I think I’ll start a trend with the latest rage in body piercings.” When his eyes went wide with surprise, I snapped, “Of course it hurts, you moron.” More and more with each moment that passed.

Luis, his mind-bending apparently complete, returned to our side and bent to inspect the bolt. “You need to remove that.”

“Yeah,” Josh said. “And call Shade.”

“No, not Shade,” I protested, struggling to keep the pain from showing on my face.

“Why not? He can heal you.”

YEAH, Fang echoed. WHY NOT?

I’ll explain later, I told the hellhound. Aloud, I said, “This is trivial. Call Gwen. She’s a trauma nurse—she’ll know what to do.” Besides, she knew what I was and wouldn’t make a fuss. “She’s on duty at the ER tonight.” I handed Josh my phone and pulled a Special Crimes Unit locator out of another pocket. I activated the beacon to send our GPS coordinates. Soon, the SCU ambulance would be here to cart away the remains.

Andrew and Luis stared down at the bolt in my side. “It’s silver,” Luis said, “or I’d remove it.”

“I don’t have a problem with silver,” Andrew said. And before I realized what he planned, he grabbed the back of it and yanked it out.

Agony burned through my side, radiating through my entire body, and I barely kept from screaming. But no

Try Me

amount of will could keep me conscious. My brain fuzzed out and I crumpled to the ground.

CHAPTER FIVE

I woke to a throbbing ache in my side, with the occasional piercing pain. Where was I? I lay curled on my right side on a comfortable surface that appeared to be made of soft, supple leather. Wherever I was, it was moving. I opened my eyes and stared straight into concerned brown eyes framed by wispy reddish blond hair. Fang.

He licked my nose. YOU'RE IN THE BACK SEAT OF LUIS'S CAR, Fang said from the floorboard. WE'RE TAKING YOU TO GWEN'S ER.

Good. There were closer hospitals, but Gwen would be discreet. I shifted to a more comfortable position and pain lanced through my side. I winced. Note to self—don't do that again. *Where are Josh and Andrew?* If Luis had done something to them—

HE DIDN'T, BUT I DID. I CHEWED ANDREW'S BUTT FOR THAT STUPID STUNT.

Literally?

NAW, THOUGH I WANTED TO. THEY'RE SHARING THE FRONT SEAT. NOT HAPPY ABOUT IT EITHER.

I glanced up to see Josh peering around the seat at me. "Her eyes are open! Val, are you okay?"

Okay? How could I be okay? He'd shot me in the side, fergawdsakes. "Yeah," I managed to say.

"You sure you don't want us to take you to Shade?"

"I'm sure," I croaked. "I want Gwen."

Fang poked me with his nose. AND ARE YOU GOING TO TELL ME NOW WHY YOU WON'T DO THE SENSIBLE THING AND HAVE SHADE HEAL YOU?

I gave him a reason he'd understand. *Remember what happened when Shade healed Josh?* Opening the healing conduits to the other world made Shade more vulnerable to the demons waiting there. Since exchanging healing energies took a lot out of him, he was less able to keep the demons at bay. He'd almost lost control then and would have killed himself to keep the demons out of our world if I hadn't stopped him.

BUT YOU WERE ABLE TO GROUND HIM THEN, Fang reminded me. YOU CAN DO IT AGAIN.

I did it then with Lola's help. Her seduction had proved more powerful than the demon's pull. But seducing him right now . . . no. Neither of us needed that kind of temptation. And while I was all gung-ho to have Shade as a boyfriend, keeping us dependent on each other couldn't be a good idea.

Besides, I wasn't sure I'd have any oomph left to control him immediately after he healed me. If I remembered right, the others he'd healed had been pretty much exhausted afterward. Plus there was another reason, but I didn't want to go into it right now.

I could feel Fang's attention sharpen on me. *YOU WANT TO FEEL THIS PAIN. MASOCHIST MUCH?*

I should have known he'd sniff it out anyway. *I'm not a masochist. It's just that . . .* Heck, I didn't know how to say this. As the Slayer, I didn't get injured often. What would happen if Shade and I made love, then I got hurt and couldn't heal as fast? I needed to know what it was like to feel pain as full humans did. I needed to know if I could handle it. I needed to know if it was worth it.

The hellhound poked me in the stomach with his nose. *HOW'S THAT WORKING FOR YOU, VAL?*

I'll let you know. Luis hit a pothole and agony seared my side. But I wasn't about to let a little pain stop me. I was determined to not be a wuss. After all, I had to live up to that heroic image in my groupies' eyes.

Fang snorted then raised his nose, sniffing as the car slowed and turned. *WE MUST BE AT THE HOSPITAL.*

Luis stopped the car and took charge. "Andrew, go get a wheelchair. Joshua, you get the trauma nurse." The vamp came around to open the door by my head.

I struggled to sit up. "I don't need a wheelchair."

"Don't be stubborn," Luis snapped. "We don't want to attract undue attention."

"Yeah, right. Like being pierced by a crossbow bolt is an everyday occurrence."

"They don't have to know what wounded you." Luis gave Andrew a passing glare as he returned with the chair. "Tell them some children were playing with bows and arrows and got out of hand."

Andrew's face turned as red as his hair, but he didn't respond to the taunt. "Do you need help?" he asked me.

Gwen came running up, her bouncing red curls not quite as brassy as Andrew's. My normally cheerful, upbeat roomie was all business as she pushed her way into the car beside me. "What happened?"

We explained and I said, "I don't want Shade for this. Can you take care of it . . . discreetly?"

She frowned. "I have to use the resources here at the hospital, which means you'll have to be seen by a doctor. Is there anything . . . unusual about your blood or anything?"

"I don't know. Probably."

Andrew nodded. "Definitely."

Crap. "And you'd better make sure it's a female doctor. If a guy gets too close . . ."

Gwen's mouth rounded in an "o" of realization.

“Don’t worry,” Luis said dismissively. “I shall ensure no one remembers anything unusual tonight.”

Gwen glanced at him curiously but didn’t ask how or why. That was only one of the many things I loved about her.

“Okay,” Gwen said decisively. “I’ll make sure she gets help.” She eased me gently into the chair and glanced at Fang. “I’m sorry, but he can’t come in.”

My best friend couldn’t be by my side? Then I wasn’t sure I wanted to go.

YOU CAN STILL REACH ME MENTALLY, EVEN IF I STAY OUTSIDE.

He was right. I hated hospitals, so I was just trying to delay the inevitable. Sighing, I thought back at him, *Okay*. I nodded at Gwen and she turned to Luis. “Can you deal with the paperwork?”

He frowned, but obviously didn’t want to admit there was something he couldn’t do.

“I’ll get the info from Micah,” Josh said. “Do you want me to call anyone else? Your family?”

Lord, no. “Anyone calls my mother and they’re dead meat. Got me?” I did *not* want her hovering over me, trying to act all maternal and caring when it probably wasn’t serious.

Josh looked surprised, but everyone nodded, so Gwen whisked me inside. I had an impression of light tiled floors, white walls, ugly harsh white lighting . . . and the distinctive hospital smell that had the blood draining from my head. If I wasn’t sick before, that smell would do it every time.

IT’S PSYCHOSOMATIC, Fang told me.

How do you even know those kinds of words?

BEFORE I MET YOU, I DID A LOT OF PEOPLE-WATCHING AND SAW A LOT OF TV THROUGH WINDOWS. HAD TO ENTERTAIN MYSELF SOMEHOW. AMAZING WHAT YOU LEARN.

I guess. But psychosomatic or not, being here made me feel worse. I liked it even less when the doctor came in to work on me.

A couple of hours later, I was bandaged up and woozy from the medication they’d given me. The doctor must have noticed something odd because she wanted to run some tests, but Luis, who pretended he was my brother so he could be by my side, used his mind-control mojo to persuade her otherwise.

When she left, I turned to Gwen. “Did she talk to anyone about my strangeness? Is there anything written down?”

“She only mentioned it to me,” Gwen assured me. “And your . . . brother,” she glanced askance at Luis, “took care of the lab techs who tested your blood. Josh helped me find all your records. There’s nothing weird in them.”

“Good.”

I fell asleep on my way home. When I woke, I was in my own bed, Fang curled up beside me, and practically everyone I knew was standing around—Luis and his two troublemakers had been joined by Shade, Alejandro and Micah. They were all chatting quietly at the foot of my bed. Gwen must have gone off-shift, because she was standing over me, checking my pulse. Made me feel a bit like Dorothy, with Gwen playing Auntie Em and Fang as Toto. Guess who the two brainless scarecrows were?

SHE’S AWAKE, Fang announced. BUT I THINK SHE’S DELIRIOUS.

No, just feeling a little goofy. “What’s going on?” I said aloud. I lifted myself up onto my elbows, wincing. Note to self: movement causes pain. “Am I about to die or something?”

“You’re fine,” Gwen soothed. “You’ll just need some peace and quiet to heal from your injury.” She glanced at the guys who had come to surround my bed, but none of them took the hint.

“Then why the death bed scene?” I persisted.

Micah grinned. “We wanted to see you for ourselves.”

Alejandro nodded. “But this will not get you out of your contract, you know.” He smiled, and I realized he was making a joke. Would wonders never cease?

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry,” Gwen said in her brisk nurse tone. “Who wants to help me make something to eat?”

She collected Josh and Andrew with her gaze and they went willingly—Gwen’s cooking was legendary in the Demon Underground. She was one of the few humans who knew about us, and because of her cooking and nursing, everyone had sort of adopted her as one of us. Luis followed, too.

When they left, I noticed Shade hadn’t approached the bed. He just stood there and, because of the swirls where his face should be, I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

HE’S NOT SURE YOU WANT HIM HERE, Fang told me.

Why not?

BECAUSE YOU REFUSED TO LET HIM HEAL YOU. DUH.

Sheesh. I wondered how to reassure Shade without letting him know Fang was picking his brain for me.

“Why didn’t you want Shade to heal you?” Micah asked, sitting on the end of my queen-sized bed.

What a great coincidence. I glanced at Fang. Or maybe not.

From the smug look on his face, definitely not. The furry telepath had struck again.

I answered Micah’s question but looked at Shade. “Because I know how much it takes out of you . . . and

what happens afterward. I didn't want that for you."

I held out my hand and Shade took it. His features blipped into focus then, and he looked both pained and relieved at the same time. He sat gingerly next to me on the bed. "I would've healed you, gladly."

"I know, and that's why I couldn't let you do it."

AWW, HOW SWEET, Fang cooed, projecting his thoughts to all who could hear him.

Micah chuckled.

"Don't encourage him," I warned. "Or you might be his next target."

"Oh, I've been used for target practice many times," Micah said with a laugh. "Remember, he was with me before he came to you."

"And now I see why you foisted him on me." I rubbed Fang's fuzzy head to let him know I didn't mean it. I didn't have to, though—he knew it. And if Fang ever lost his snark, I'd probably think he was possessed or sick or something.

"So," Alejandro said. "No more vampire hunting for you until you are well. Besides, Luis tells me that the message was delivered."

"Yes, but the other vamps aren't really organized, so I don't know how the word will spread. Or how much good it'll do if you're not willing to back up Luis's threats . . ."

"That will not be a problem. We will indeed take the war to the streets. We cannot jeopardize our big announcement. He spoke for me in this matter."

I shrugged then winced when the movement hurt my side. "Okay, boss. I won't purposefully hunt down any vampires. But I'm scheduled to meet Trevor at dawn." Which was probably coming up really soon.

Alejandro nodded. "I called him and let him know you will not be able to make that appointment, so he plans to canvass the city on his own. He asked if you could meet him at midnight tonight." He looked at Micah. "Will she be well enough then?"

My cuz nodded and said, "She'll still be in pain, but her accelerated healing will help. So long as you weren't planning on her doing anything strenuous, she should be fine."

I hated the way they talked about me as if I wasn't there. Strengthened by Fang and Shade's nearness, I said, "*She* is right here and can decide that for herself."

Micah lifted an eyebrow. "And what does *she* decide?"

"That I can meet Trevor, because it shouldn't involve anything more strenuous than driving around in a car looking for some sign of the books."

"Very good," Alejandro said. "I shall see you then. And now, if you will excuse me? It's approaching dawn."

He bowed and left. "I'd better go, too," Micah said, and gave me a kiss on the forehead. "Take care of yourself."

"I will," I promised.

After he was gone, only Shade, Fang and I were left in the room. And with all the other distractions gone, I was a hundred times more aware of Shade. So was Lola, and, pain or not, she was kind of interested in coaxing him down to lie beside us.

I CAN LEAVE IF YOU WANT, Fang offered.

No, don't. The plan was to stay away from Shade as much as possible until my contract was over. He was just too much temptation.

Shade looked concerned. "Are you really okay?"

"I'll be fine. I heal fast and this wasn't enough of a wound to call out the big guns." I yawned. "I don't know if it's the meds or what, but I'm suddenly very tired."

"Should I leave you alone then?" Shade asked, looking reluctant.

"If you don't mind. You'd better go and get some of Gwen's cooking before those others scarf it all down."

"Don't you want some?"

"Not now. The meds are making my stomach a little queasy. I'll eat later." Then, to punctuate my decision, I let out another huge yawn.

"Okay," he said and leaned over to give me a peck on the lips. "Get well soon."

I watched Shade leave with regret. It would have been nice to snuggle up with him, but not the best choice when I was so weak. As Shade closed the door softly behind him, Fang cuddled even closer. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE ME LEAVE, TOO, ARE YOU?

Not a chance. Pets are therapeutic, haven't you heard?

YOU GOT THAT STRAIGHT.

Chuckling, I stroked his soft ears and closed my eyes, letting the medication fog my brain. With any luck, I'd soon be fast asleep.

I was partway there when a faint, urgent thought pierced through the fog.

Help me. Find me.

Huh? Who the hell was that?

CHAPTER SIX

When I woke the next day, I felt really groggy. It was dark again, so I must have slept a long time. Better for healing, I guess. Something niggled at the edge of my brain, something I wanted to remember. It took a moment, but I recalled the voice I'd heard right before I drifted off to sleep. Was it real, or the product of a drugged mind?

I listened, but didn't hear anything now, not even Fang. I hadn't recognized the voice, and doubted anyone could send a thought from a distance into the head of someone they'd never met. Sheesh, I'd probably dreamed the weird incident. No more of those drugs for me.

Fang was nowhere around and the townhouse was quiet. I sat up and turned on the bedside light. Feeling a twinge of pain, I reminded myself to take it easy. I would have liked to stay and snuggle longer, but my bladder and stomach were both protesting.

I used the bathroom and showered, checking my wound. It was healing nicely. I still had some pain, but nowhere near yesterday's level. Gwen had left some bandages and instructions, so I was able to replace the dressing. Feeling better now that I was up and around, I wandered into the kitchen to find something to eat.

Shade was there, reading a book. It looked kind of weird given the general swirliness of his hands and face, but I was getting used to it.

Now that we were dating, should I kiss him each time I saw him? I wasn't sure about the protocol between boyfriend and girlfriend. On TV, they seemed to suck face all the time, but it didn't seem like people did that in real life. And with us, kissing could lead to other things left better unthought-of.

"Hey there," he said softly. "How do you feel?"

I hesitated but when he didn't make a move toward me, I wasn't sure if I should be offended or happy. Lola was disappointed, of course. But, like a two-year-old, she needed to learn that she didn't always get everything she wanted. Besides, she'd gotten pretty stoked at Alejandro's house and should be good for awhile. "Better, thanks. Where's Fang?"

"I brought Princess over, and they took off together out the doggie door. He said he'd be back in time to go to work."

"Good." I opened the refrigerator and looked inside, hoping I'd find something I wouldn't have to cook.

"Gwen left you some lasagna," Shade said. "She wouldn't let anyone else touch it. Some garlic bread, too."

"She's a goddess," I said with relief. Too bad garlic didn't really deter vampires. I found the covered plate

and put it in the microwave, careful not to stretch my injured side too much.

“You’re not really going in to work for Alejandro today, are you?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I?” Shade might be my boyfriend, but he didn’t dictate what I could and couldn’t do. I’d had enough of that from my mother to last me a lifetime.

“Oh, I don’t know. Because you’re stiff and still hurting, maybe?”

Shade, sarcastic? That was a new one. I turned to look at him to gauge his expression. It didn’t do any good, of course. The swirls seemed more agitated, if that meant anything. “It’s that accelerated healing of mine. I really do feel better. Besides, I’m not doing the Slayer thing tonight. Just going to look for the books.”

“With Trevor Jackson?”

I didn’t quite understand the tone of his voice. “Yes, and whoever else Alejandro sends along.” The microwave beeped and I took the food out. Maybe he didn’t trust Trevor either. “Did you meet him when he came to see Micah?”

As I joined him at the small round table, Shade said, “No, but I heard about him.”

Again, the tone of his voice was sarcastic. Wanting to see his expression, I casually placed my hand on his arm. Because people rarely saw his face, Shade had never learned to hide his feelings. He was getting better at it with exposure to the Demon Underground, but it was still incredibly easy to read him. Right now, he looked hurt . . . and defensive.

Whoa. Was he jealous? He had absolutely no reason to be. I took a bite of Gwen’s fabulous lasagna then said casually, “So you heard he really likes himself . . . and Rosa?”

I left my hand on his arm so I could gauge his emotions.

He looked surprised then frowned. “I heard he likes you, too.”

“He flirts with everyone. He has a very high opinion of himself and thinks everyone else should, too.”

Shade relaxed, moving his arm so his hand covered mine. “And do you?”

I shrugged. “He hasn’t shown me anything yet but a nice exterior.” I grinned. “But yours is prettier.” I leaned over to kiss him. It seemed like the right time. More natural. Gee, maybe I’d get the hang of this dating thing soon after all. Lola’s interest spiked, but I pulled away before she could do anything about it.

Shade grimaced but it wasn’t because of the kiss. He stroked my arm possessively, like he wasn’t even aware he was doing it. Kinda nice. “Guys aren’t pretty,” he protested.

“Devastatingly handsome then,” I teased. When he twisted his lips in protest, I added, “Oh, come on, you have to know you’re gorgeous. I’m glad you’re a shadow demon so other girls don’t see the real you. Otherwise, I’d have to beat them off with a stake.” I took a bite and grinned at him, wondering how he’d respond.

He gave me a slow smile that had my blood sizzling and Lola wanting to play. He leaned forward and caressed my cheek. "I thought you loved me for my mind . . . and my ability to please Lola."

I swallowed and the lasagna went down hard. Oh, my. The "L" word. Love, not Lola. Had we really progressed that far . . . or was it just a figure of speech? Better assume the latter.

Trying to act casual, I speared another bite and waved my fork airily. "That, too," I said, trying to keep it light. But in reality, what I loved about Shade was his willingness to accept me totally as I was, without trying to change me. The eye candy was just a great bonus.

His expression softened, looking almost sappy. It was nice to see how much he cared about me, but embarrassing, too. I felt my face warm and didn't know how to react, where to look. Plus, I didn't want him to see how much I cared about him. That would just make it harder to stay away from him. So, I pretended to be really interested in the food for awhile.

I owed him the truth, though. I stared down at my plate, unwilling to raise my eyes yet. "Shade, I just want you to know that if I seem a little distant lately, it's not you."

"It's not?"

He sounded doubtful so I looked up and gazed into his fabulous blue eyes. "No. It's this whole . . . thing," I said, for lack of a better word. Or rather, lack of any words I wanted to use in front of him.

Luckily, he seemed to get what I was trying to say. "You mean making love?"

"Yeah, that thing." I avoided his gaze again.

His voice softened. "I told you I wouldn't push you. I understand what a huge deal it is for you, and we won't do anything unless you're absolutely ready."

That's how he felt now, but what if I put the decision off for months, even years? Would he be so understanding then? He was a guy, after all. A guy with needs that Lola stirred up every time we touched.

I was afraid to ask that question, so I said, "It's just that I want to make that decision myself, not lose control accidentally and be coerced into it by the demon inside me." Sheesh, this was getting intense. To lighten it up, I added, "You're just too tempting, you know?"

He laughed. "So are you. But don't worry, I totally get it. We'll tone it down a notch."

Relieved, I said, "Why don't you come along with us tonight . . . unless Micah has something else for you?" I didn't want him to think there was any reason to be jealous of Trevor, and meeting the keeper for himself should do that nicely.

Another smile spread across his face. "Sounds good. Micah let me off work to look after you as long as you're still not a hundred percent. I picked up your bike from Alejandro's."

That annoyed me a little—I could look after myself. But there was no use quibbling about it. I glanced at the

clock. Wow—I'd slept for a long time. It was almost ten o'clock.

We watched television for awhile then took off when Fang and Princess came in. Though Shade had installed a sidecar on his Ducati for Princess, we didn't take her with us. Her bluntness and willingness to speak whatever she heard in someone's mind often made her a real pain in the butt and had caused problems in the past. She was just as willing to stay at my place and chill.

I didn't realize how painful the ride over would be. But every time I cornered or changed balance, my side screamed at me. Thankfully, the mansion wasn't too far away. Rosa answered the door this time and Trevor was waiting for us in Alejandro's Christmassy great room, chatting with Andrew. He was so crisp and fashionably put together that he looked radically out of place in Alejandro's old-world style home. Rosa excused herself, leaving only non-vamps in the room.

Trevor rose from the dark, heavy couch with a wide smile. "Please, introduce me to your friend," he said to me, not taking his eyes off Shade.

I did, and Trevor looked delighted when he shook Shade's hand and his features appeared. "You're a shadow demon?"

Shade nodded. "Yes. And you?"

SMOOTH, Fang said approvingly.

Yeah, the Demon Underground might consider it rude to ask about a person's demon origins, but Shade managed to make it sound natural.

"The keeper of the *Encyclopedia Magicka*," Trevor said, not letting go of Shade's hand.

Which didn't answer the question about what kind of demon he was, darn it.

"Are you joining us?" Trevor continued.

It didn't seem to bother Shade that the guy was still holding his hand and gazing into his face, especially since Trevor seemed so genuinely glad to meet him. "Yes, if you don't mind." He even smiled.

What was up with that? He met Trevor and suddenly all his jealousy vanished?

HE CAN SEE NOW THAT TREVOR IS NO THREAT TO HIM.

Humph. He could have taken my word for it

"I don't mind at all." Trevor turned to glance at Andrew, who seemed less sullen in Trevor's presence. "Andrew tells me that he doesn't remember where he hid the books, but I thought we could retrace his steps, see if I can sense them."

"Works for me," I agreed, wondering why if the reason he still hadn't let go of Shade's hand was because the swirls made him uncomfortable.

I DON'T KNOW, Fang said. MAYBE THE DUDE SWINGS BOTH WAYS.

I hadn't even thought about that. Or maybe his kind of demon learned more about people by shaking their hand? Naw, a bit far-fetched.

Rosa returned with a set of keys. Handing them to me, she said, "Alejandro is loaning you one of his cars tonight, to make it easier to search. Please, do not damage it. The cars are his pride and joy."

I appreciated the offer. It would be possible to search together on our motorcycles, but difficult. Besides, I didn't want either Trevor or Andrew riding behind me on my bike, with their arms around me. The thought made me squirm, and not in a good way. And I really wanted to give my injury a break. "I'll try not to," I said. Best not to make promises when I never knew what we'd encounter. "Thanks."

I'M SURE ALEJANDRO HAS INSURANCE, Fang said with a doggie grin. YOU MIGHT NEED IT.

Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.

Andrew got into the front with me so he could give directions, and Shade and Trevor rode in the back, Fang riding on Shade's lap so the shadow demon would look normal to anyone we passed.

"So, where do we start?" I asked, fumbling with the unfamiliar controls.

Andrew shrugged. "The last place I remember having the books was at Mood's house." He turned around to speak to Trevor. "She locked me in her basement because I was planning on burning down the mansion, but I broke out."

"Okay, let's start there," I said.

Andrew gave me the address and I drove toward the west side of town, near Lackland Air Force Base, following his directions. Trevor and Shade were chatting in the back seat, having a good old time. "Uh, Trevor, the books may be hidden anywhere along this route. Shouldn't you pay attention?"

"No need," he said airily. "I'll feel them if I get within five hundred feet, no matter how much I'm enjoying myself."

And he continued to enjoy himself while I played chauffeur. By the time we reached Mood's house, he'd learned more about Shade than I'd ever thought to ask, like the fact that his parents were both dead, Micah's father had taken him in as a kid, and his favorite hobbies were learning about demonkind and competing in online games against other players. It annoyed me that I felt embarrassed for not knowing these things.

"Okay, we're here," I said, sounding more snappish than I'd intended as I turned off the engine. "Now what?"

Trevor shook his head. "They're not here."

"Can you tell that they've been here?" Shade asked. "Can you track them?"

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way.” Trevor tapped Andrew on the shoulder. “What do you remember after leaving here that night?”

Andrew thought for a moment. “I remember the books encouraging me to use my powers to get back at the vampires, so I was all about burning their house down. But the books were afraid they’d burn, too, so they told me to hide them.” He paused, then added slowly, “That’s the last time I remember seeing them.”

HE’S TELLING THE TRUTH, Fang confirmed.

“Think harder,” Trevor urged. “What do you remember immediately after you left here? Do you remember arriving at the mansion? What direction did you come from?”

Andrew shook his head. “I’m sorry, but all I remember is the books badgering me to hide, hide, hide. I’ve been trying to remember for days, but all I recall is leaving here to find a hiding place. Then the next thing I knew, I was splashing gasoline on the side of the house, more powerful and more pissed off than I’ve ever been in my life.”

Trevor clenched his fists on his thighs and persisted. “Do you have any idea how much time passed between the two memories?”

Again, Andrew paused. “I’m not sure ’cause Mood used her mojo on me to make me stupid happy. It was about noon when she put me in the basement. She put me to sleep and took away my cell so I don’t know what time it was when I woke up.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how long I slept. All I know is that it was still daylight when I left.”

“Andrew arrived at the mansion right before the sun went down,” I added. “So he could have had plenty of time to hide them anywhere inside or outside the city.”

“I was afraid of that,” Trevor muttered. He sighed. “I didn’t get very far trying to find them yesterday. I guess we’ll just have to start at the center and spiral out from there.”

That sounded really tedious. “I know San Antonio looks like it’s circular on the map, but that’s gonna be more difficult than it sounds.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Shade said.

Yeah, fine for him. He was having a fun time with his buddy in the back while I had to drive. But I wasn’t planning on going anywhere until I got some answers. I twisted around in my seat to look at Trevor. Pain stabbed through me. Damn, I’d forgotten about my wound. This being more human stuff wasn’t such a good idea. “Maybe if you told us more about the books, it would help us figure out where to look.”

He grimaced. “I doubt it.”

“Makes sense to me,” Shade said.

Now that Shade had suggested it, Trevor was all over it. He shrugged and said, “The encyclopedia was cre-

ated a long time ago—I don't know when—by a group of demons who wanted their part-human descendants to understand their heritage. Unfortunately, it's patchy in spots. Partially because they assumed people would know more than they do, and partially because some demons were more reluctant to put their strengths and vulnerabilities down in writing than others.”

SO THAT'S WHY THE SUCCUBUS AND INCUBUS ENTRIES WERE SO INCOMPLETE, Fang said.

Yeah, I'd wondered about that. “That explains the first volume,” I said, “but what about the rest? The two with the dark magicks?”

I sensed Trevor really didn't want to answer me but he finally said, “They were both created by one particular kind of demon who wanted to pass his magickal knowledge on to his descendants.”

“What kind of demon?” I persisted.

Trevor paused, and Shade snapped his fingers. “The two books are about magickal spells, right? Was it a mage demon?”

Trevor looked annoyed, so I guess Shade hit it on the head. “What's a mage demon?” I asked.

“One of the most dangerous demons to enter our world,” Shade explained. “They can tap into emotions and use them to power magickal spells . . . and most of them are pretty evil. Those are the dark magicks people sensed.” He turned to Trevor. “Right?”

“For the most part,” Trevor conceded. “But the demon's descendants can't create new spells—only full-blooded mage demons are able to do that. Their descendants are only able to use the ones set down in the books.”

“Whoa,” I said. “That's a dangerous thing to leave lying around.”

Trevor nodded. “Exactly. When the Demon Underground was formed and they tried to keep demonkind on the down low, some of the demons became keepers—the ones who could sense the dark magick and keep it contained.”

“Why didn't they just destroy the books?” I asked.

“Let's just say that destroying them would release dark magicks in an explosion far more catastrophic than any nuclear warhead. At worst, it would destroy this world. At best, it could severely warp our reality.”

Fang laid his head down with a sigh. LET'S NOT DO THAT, THEN.

Andrew looked horrified at the thought that he'd had these things in his possession.

“So why not just let them stay hidden?” I suggested.

“Because keepers aren't the only ones who can sense the magicks in the books,” Trevor said.

Shade petted Fang absently. “I imagine the mage demons can, too.” At Trevor's nod, Shade asked, “Are there

any in San Antonio?”

Trevor shrugged. “It’s the same as with the books. I can sense one if I come within five hundred feet, but otherwise, I have no idea unless they use some of the dark magicks. But they probably sensed the books waking at the same time I did. There may be some of them searching here as well.”

Oh, crap. Better find them fast, then. Driving in spirals it was. I started the car and headed toward the center of the city, while Trevor pulled up a map on his Smartphone.

“Your knowledge of mage demons is impressive,” Trevor told Shade.

“As I said before, it’s a hobby. I’ve been trying to learn as much about demons as I can.”

Yeah, with his ability to bring them through from the other side, I guess he wanted to know what he was dealing with.

“How did you become a keeper?” Shade asked.

“My father was a keeper before me. He taught me everything I know.”

“I thought you said your father lost them,” I said, wanting to taunt him a bit.

“Not exactly.”

I turned onto US 90. “What do you mean, not exactly?” I distinctly remembered that’s what he said.

“Actually, it’s my father who’s lost.”

Crap. Now I felt guilty for trying to poke at him. “I’m sorry. What happened to him?”

“The books happened to him,” Trevor said bitterly. “They ate him.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

I glanced at Trevor in the rear view mirror. “They what? They *ate* him? How is that possible?”

“Not literally. He’s trapped inside them.”

“How can he *fit*?” Andrew asked in bewilderment.

“It’s magick,” Trevor said in an irritated tone. “He’s stuck in some kind of . . . pocket universe or something.”

I had this strange image of the books hoovering up Trevor’s father like a swish of smoke, like in *I Dream of Jeannie*.

WOW, THOSE BOOKS MUST REALLY SUCK, Fang snarked.

I stifled a laugh. It really wasn’t funny. “Are you sure about that?” I asked. “I mean, do you know for certain he’s still alive?”

“Yes. I-I know he’s still in there.”

“How did it happen?” Shade asked.

Trevor looked out into the night, hiding his expression from everyone, so I turned my attention back to the road.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s okay,” Shade said.

Like hell. I pulled over into an empty parking lot under a light and parked so I could make my point. Turning around to glare at them, I said, “No, it’s not okay. If those things are likely to eat someone else, we need to know about it right now.”

“They won’t,” Trevor bit out. He got out of the car and slammed the door, running his hand through his gelled hair as he turned his back on us.

I grabbed the keys to keep Andrew from doing anything stupid and followed him. “How do you know that?”

He whirled around. “I just do, okay?”

“Not good enough. Those books are loose in San Antonio somewhere, and we need to know as much as we

can so we can figure out what to do when we find them.”

Shade and Fang had jumped out of the car as well, though Andrew chose to stay out of the fray. Shade drew his hoodie up over his face then made calming motions with his hands. “We’re all friends here, right?”

How could I be friends with someone I didn’t trust?

Trevor glanced at Shade then took a deep breath and breathed it out before saying, “That’s why we’re out here, together, to find them. And when we do, I know how to handle them.”

I crossed my arms, and tried to sound reasonable. “If your father couldn’t handle them, why do you think you can?”

He glared at me but didn’t let his pissiness show in his carefully deliberate voice. “Because I’ve had more training than he had. I did a lot of research to figure out exactly what happened. I know what he did wrong and I won’t make the same mistake.”

“What did he do wrong?”

He looked about ready to explode, but kept it together. “It’s confidential—for keepers only.”

“What if someone else does the same thing ‘by mistake’ and gets sucked up into the book as well? Shouldn’t we try to keep that from happening?”

He waved that argument away impatiently. “It’s something only a keeper would attempt.”

“Then what *can* you tell us?”

Trevor paused for a moment. “Look, knowledge is passed from one keeper to another, teacher to apprentice. It’s too risky to write it down, too dangerous to share. Don’t you get it? These books are *not safe*.”

I shrugged. “They were safe with me for many years.”

“Until you gave them up. Now that you know what they can do, they won’t be safe with you anymore either. Only with keepers.”

“So, why isn’t *your* apprentice here?” If these things were that dangerous, he really ought to train someone else how to handle them, too.

“I don’t have one. Yet. I was waiting until I found the books before I chose one.” He paused, then added, “In case you’re wondering, you wouldn’t qualify.”

“I wasn’t.” Like I’d *want* to work with him. “But what I *was* wondering is how you got training when your father, the former keeper, got sucked into the book. You had to be like an infant when that happened.”

He shrugged. “I’m older than I look. And my father’s mentor was still alive—he helped me a lot.”

There were still a lot of unanswered questions. “What happened to the books after your father got sucked

in?” I asked. “How did you lose them?”

“I didn’t lose them—I was only a kid at the time. The Underground in LA took them. They told me someone was careless and they were stolen.”

BOY, HE HAS AN ANSWER FOR EVERYTHING, DOESN’T HE? Fang said.

Yeah, he was a bit too glib for my tastes. Maybe that’s because it was all true?

Then again . . . maybe not.

I SURE WISH I COULD READ HIS MIND RIGHT NOW, Fang said.

Ditto.

“Do you know how to release your father once you find the books?” Shade asked.

Trevor smiled at him, seeming relieved for a question he was willing to answer. “Yes, I do. And I have everything I need to do just that.”

The way these two got along set my teeth on edge. “What if something happens to you?” I persisted. “What if you die before the books are found?”

Trevor smirked. “You’ll just have to make sure that doesn’t happen, won’t you?”

I wasn’t about to play bodyguard to some idiot demon with delusions of grandeur. Unfortunately, my brain didn’t catch up with my mouth in time to stop me from saying, “The hell I will. How do we know you’re not lying?”

Shade tried to step in. “Val, really—”

“That’s it,” Trevor said, throwing his hands up in the air. “I’m not gonna take this crap from a baby succubus who can’t even cut it in the real world.” He looked me up and down. “I have no idea what anyone sees in you.”

Fang growled and the hairs along his spine stood up on end. WATCH IT, BUDDY.

The so-called keeper turned and walked off. “I’ll find the encyclopedia by myself,” he tossed over his shoulder.

“Aren’t you going to stop him?” Shade asked.

“No, why should I? He can take care of himself. He’s the *keeper*, you know.”

“Val, really. You’re sounding childish now.”

“I’m *what*?”

Ignoring my indignation, Shade added, “He doesn’t know the city. He could get lost.”

“Not with that Smartphone of his.”

“He’s on foot, without a car, and this isn’t exactly the best neighborhood.”

I folded my arms and tapped my foot. “So? He can call a taxi or rent a car. And if he can handle dark magicks, surely he can handle a mugger or two.”

What was wrong with everyone? Had Trevor enthralled everyone but me into believing he was the best thing since submachine guns?

Fang scratched his ear with his hind leg. NOPE. NO SIGN OF THAT IN SHADE OR ANDREW. I WOULD HAVE NOTICED.

Then what has them so snowed?

IT’S CHARM, BABE. CHARM. YOU MIGHT WANT TO GET SOME OF IT.

“What’s gotten into you?” Shade asked incredulously. “You really seem to have it in for this guy.”

“I don’t believe him, that’s what. Ask Fang. He’ll tell you—he doesn’t believe Trevor either.”

Fang backed off. OH, NO. I’M NOT GETTING INVOLVED IN THIS. YOU TWO DUKE IT OUT AAAAAALL BY YOURSELVES. He trotted back to the car to join Andrew who had scrunched down in his seat, both apparently trying to stay out of the line of fire.

“Why don’t you believe Trevor?” Shade persisted.

“He’s just too good to be true. I don’t trust him.”

Shade paced in a circle, and I could read tension in his body and in the agitated whirling of his face. “That’s ridiculous. He’s just trying to find his father and save the world. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. If it’s true.”

“And what do you base your suspicion on?”

“My gut,” I shot back. “It’s helped me survive quite a few vampire attacks. What do you base your *trust* on?”

He halted suddenly and turned his swirly hooded face toward me. He let out an incredulous laugh and came over to grasp my hands. “Is that it? Are you *jealous* of him?” He looked stupidly delighted by the thought.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I know you like what Lola does for you too much to give it up for some pretty guy.”

WHOA, BABE, Fang said from the car, to me alone. THAT’S HARSH. YOU MIGHT WANT TO DIAL BACK THE TONE A BIT.

I thought you were staying out of this? I snapped at him.

OKAY. THIS IS ME STAYING OUT. DIG YOUR OWN GRAVE.

Shade looked hurt, then let go of me so I couldn't see his features anymore. "I didn't mean jealous of me," he said slowly. "I meant jealous of Trevor."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Shade stuck his hands in his pockets and his shoulders went up and down in a shrug. "You know . . . he's good-looking, he makes friends easily with all of *your* friends, *and* he's the only one who can save the world. That's usually your job, isn't it?"

That was so unfair I didn't know what to say. What made it worse is that he said it in such a matter-of-fact way. Was it true? I spluttered for a moment, then demanded, "Do you really believe that?"

"Can you honestly say it's not true?" he asked softly.

Oh, no. He was *not* going to try to use calm reason on me to get me to agree with him. "Yes, I can. I don't trust him because . . . because . . ." My thoughts were whirling too fast to make sense of them. "I just don't, that's why."

"Maybe if you thought about it for a moment—"

"No." I held up a hand. "I am *not* talking about this anymore. We're going to go back to the mansion and we're going to start over, okay?"

"Okay, but I'll drive. You're too upset."

And that ticked me off even more. "Fine," I yelled and threw the keys at him. "You drive and go get your new friend. I'm walking."

I turned on my heel and proceeded to do just that.

"C'mon, Val . . ." Shade protested.

I ignored him, too mad to even talk to him right now. Instead, I put my head down and quickened my stride. I needed to walk this off.

He started the car and pulled out of the parking lot—away from me. Figured. Perversely, it ticked me off that he didn't even try to ask me to stop.

BECAUSE I TOLD HIM NOT TO, Fang said.

I glanced down. I'd been stomping so hard in my boots that I hadn't even heard the clicking of his nails as he caught up to me. "That's no excuse," I muttered, and hated the fact that tears choked my throat and threatened to spill from my eyes.

WHAT'S WRONG?

Damn it, we just had our first fight.

AND IT PROBABLY WON'T BE THE LAST, Fang added wisely. DON'T WORRY, HE STILL LOVES YOU.

I sniffled. *You sure?*

I'M SURE. AND MAYBE IT'S FOR THE BEST AFTER ALL.

How do you figure?

WELL, YOU WANTED TO STAY AWAY FROM HIM FOR AWHILE. HERE'S YOUR EXCUSE.

Maybe. But I hadn't wanted it to be like this My shoulders sagged and all of the mad went out of me. Dang. Now I was going to have to walk home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I glanced around, trying to get my bearings. Where was I? Somewhere on the west side of San Antonio, far from anywhere I wanted to be. Not exactly the best neighborhood. Creepy, in fact. I looked down at my feet. Dang. These boots weren't made for walking, either. And my side was still too sore to be doing much hiking. Losing my temper . . . not the brightest thing to do.

Fang clicked along beside me. YOU WON'T HEAR ANY ARGUMENT FROM ME.

I glanced down at him. "Say something helpful," I challenged him.

HOW ABOUT CALLING FOR A RIDE?

I doubted Alejandro would be very happy with me if I asked someone to pick me up after I'd already given away the keys to one of his cars.

THEN CALL MICAH OR THE SCU.

I was kind of on vacation from the SCU, and many of them still saw me as a monster. I didn't even know if they'd come. Maybe Dan would, but he might ask questions I really didn't want to answer. Telling an ex about an argument I had with my current boyfriend just seemed . . . wrong.

I glanced at my phone. Almost two in the morning. Micah would still be at the club. I called his office at Club Purgatory and his assistant Tessa answered.

"This is Val. Is Micah there?"

"Sorry, he's on stage for his last set right now. Can I have him call you?"

I squirmed. Seeing Micah dance on stage for women made me uncomfortable. That's how he fed his incubus lust demon—by drawing small bits of energy from the women he seduced every night in his dance. I understood it, but watching it made me feel like a voyeur since I was the only woman not affected by his act. And, obviously, even thinking about it made me squirm. "Uh, maybe you can help me," I told Tessa. "I'm stuck on foot out at Wolff Stadium. Is there someone who could come out and pick up Fang and me?"

"Sure. The club is about to close and it's pretty quiet here tonight, so I'll send Ludwig."

"Great," I said with relief. The water demon, who also worked as a bouncer at the club, didn't talk much. "Thanks—I appreciate it."

"No problem. Where exactly will you be?"

I gave her instructions on where to find us in the stadium parking lot, then sat down under a light pole to wait. Fang flopped down beside me and closed his eyes. WAKE ME WHEN HE GETS HERE.

It was pretty dead here at this time of morning. Not even the undead or the gangs were hanging around to disturb the peace. Just as well—I wasn't in the mood to mix it up right now. Instead, I wanted to figure out what had happened tonight. Why did Shade trust Trevor when I didn't?

I thought back to our encounters. What had Trevor done to make me suspicious? The fact he didn't let us know what kind of demon he was? No, not really. A lot of demons in the Underground preferred to keep their powers secret, and I didn't suspect them of anything nefarious.

Maybe because Trevor was so arrogant about being a keeper? No, that didn't make sense either. Being arrogant made me annoyed at him, not suspicious. Then what?

Was Shade right? Was I jealous of Trevor? He had oodles of charm, made friends easily, totally won over Shade without hardly trying, and even I had to admit the guy was totally hot.

A good reason to hate anyone.

Okay, maybe I was a tad jealous. Maybe I *wanted* to find something wrong with him. And maybe I was annoyed by his confidence. He thought he could just take the books like they really belonged to him, without anyone telling him no.

Was that it? I should probably give him the benefit of the doubt. Stop getting in his face and cooperate more. Assume he was innocent until proven guilty.

Yeah, a dark part of me agreed. Give him enough rope to hang himself.

Okay, even discounting possible jealousy on my part, I still didn't trust him. But I didn't know why. Maybe something I'd seen and noted unconsciously?

I sighed. If I didn't want to look like a jealous fool—and who would?—I needed to pretend to believe him, especially around Shade. I spent the rest of the waiting time musing on how to go about faking my cooperation.

It didn't take long for Ludwig to show up in Micah's car. As he drove us back to the club, I decided to concentrate on learning more about Trevor, without alerting the guy that I was still suspicious.

The club had just closed, so it was a lot quieter than usual. Fang and I made our way to Micah's office, decorated simply yet elegantly in burgundy and silver for the holidays, and found him and Tessa there. He'd already showered and changed after his act, so thank heavens I didn't have *that* embarrassment. They were counting the night's receipts when I came in, so I sat down and waited until they were done.

"What's up?" Micah asked. "How did you get stranded? Did your bike conk out on you?"

"No. I—" Too humiliating to go into details. I shrugged. "It's not important." Changing the subject before he could say more, I asked, "How do you know Trevor Jackson is who he says he is?"

Micah glanced at his elfin-looking assistant. “Tessa confirmed his credentials.”

“Not exactly,” Tessa said. “I tried to call the Los Angeles Underground, but no one was there. It is headquartered in an acting studio, so it’s usually closed for the holidays. But Trevor had information about the Los Angeles Underground, knew Micah was the leader here, and knew about the books. I figured he had to be one of us.”

Micah asked, “Do you have reason to think he might not be, Val?”

“Not really. But do you know what kind of demon he is? Fang can’t read him, and I don’t think that’s ever happened with a demon before.”

NEVER, Fang confirmed.

Micah looked thoughtful. “No, I don’t. But since you had the *Encyclopedia Magicka* for so many years, a lot of knowledge has been lost.” When I grimaced, he added quickly, “I’m not blaming you—you didn’t know what your father had given you. I simply mean we don’t have enough information to make an assessment.”

I glanced at Tessa. “I don’t suppose you got a read on him?” If the soothsayer demon had a prophecy, that might tell us something.

She shook her head. “Afraid not. Touching him didn’t awaken my gift.”

Oh, yeah, that reminded me. “But touching Alejandro did. Why did you tell him that I was his only hope for getting accepted when he has his coming-out party?”

She raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t know I did. You know I can’t control my prophecies . . . or remember them.”

“I know.” It just irritated me that her prediction had bound me to the vamp for a while.

Fang poked me in the leg. FOCUS, VAL. YOU WERE ASKING ABOUT TREVOR.

Oh, yeah.

But Micah remembered. “Why do you think Trevor isn’t who he says he is?”

“Just a gut feeling. He’s too polished, too slick. I don’t trust him. And have you ever even heard of a keeper before?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean one doesn’t exist.” Micah thought for a moment. “How would he know about the books if he wasn’t?”

Oh yeah, I forgot Micah didn’t know what I’d learned. “He says his father was trapped inside them by a mage demon.” When Tessa exclaimed in surprise, I quickly explained what I’d found out that evening.

“That does make it sound as if he knows what he’s talking about,” Micah said gently. “I’ve never even heard of a mage demon before.”

“Maybe.” I was still doubtful.

“I could try to contact the Los Angeles Underground again,” Tessa offered. “Maybe if I leave a message about how important this is, someone will call back.”

“A good idea,” Micah said. “I trust Val’s gut more than most people’s.”

That gave me a warm and fuzzy feeling. Now I remembered why I liked the folks in the Demon Underground so much—they appreciated the things that made me different from the rest of the world, the things that made me Val Shapiro.

LIKE THE FACT THAT YOU HAVE THE WORLD’S BEST HELLHOUND AT YOUR SIDE, Fang added.

Yep, like that, I agreed, scratching his ears.

“Since he’s visiting, I’ve invited Trevor to the Underground’s Christmas party tomorrow night,” Micah said. “Maybe we can learn more about him there.”

Christmas party?

Fang snorted. SHE FORGOT.

Oh, yeah, I vaguely remembered something about a party . . . just not when and where it was happening. Parties, with all those people, made me uncomfortable. “I only forgot for a moment,” I said defensively. “But don’t worry, I’ll be there. And that’s a good idea, Micah. He might talk more to you.”

“Do you really believe he wants the books because his father is trapped in them?” Tessa asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably. But he admits he’s never actually been a keeper, so I’m not sure why he thinks he’ll be able to control the books if his father couldn’t.” I thought for a moment. “And I don’t buy his explanation of why they never tried to control me.” I glanced at Tessa. “You held them for awhile, right? What did you feel?”

Tessa shrugged. “I didn’t have them for very long—only long enough to bring them from the bar to this office. I do remember sensing the dark magicks. They didn’t try to control me, though. Maybe I didn’t have them long enough.”

“I never felt anything like that. Maybe I’m not sensitive enough?” I was grasping for any explanation.

“I doubt it,” Micah said. “More likely it was because they’d been with you for so long.”

“Maybe.” I thought for a moment. “Trevor said he could sense the books if he got within five hundred feet of them. Tessa, do you think you could sense them if you got that close, since you know what they feel like?”

The soothsayer demon shook her head. “No, I only felt them while holding them. But you had them for what? Thirteen years? Maybe you could sense them.”

“I doubt it. I don’t remember ever noticing that before.”

“Are you sure?” Micah asked. “Have you tried?”

Fang broadcast his thoughts to the room. IT’S WORTH A SHOT, BABE. I KINDA REMEMBER FEELING LIKE YOU HAD A SMALL PIECE OF YOURSELF MISSING WHEN YOU GAVE UP THE BOOKS.

I stared at him in surprise. “Really? Why didn’t you say something?”

AT THE TIME, I THOUGHT IT WAS BECAUSE YOU AND DAN BROKE UP. NOW, I’M WONDERING IF IT WAS THE BOOKS.

“It might be,” Tessa said eagerly. “Why don’t you see if you can sense them—find them before he does?”

Micah nodded. “I would like to have a look at them before Trevor claims them as their keeper. You might even have a wider range than he does.”

I spread my hands, feeling inadequate. “I don’t even know where to start.”

MAYBE THAT CANDLE THING, Fang suggested.

Candle thing? Oh yeah, Micah had taught me to go to a still inner place by staring at a candle. He’d done it to help me learn to control Lola, but maybe it would work for this, too. “Okay, I’ll try it.” It wouldn’t hurt. Besides, this way, I’d have a good reason to tell Alejandro why I wasn’t accompanying Trevor on his search. Otherwise, the vamp leader might not be too happy with me.

He wasn’t. Especially when Micah returned me to the mansion, and I arrived without the car and without Trevor. Alejandro sat in his throne-like chair behind the massive desk in his study and regarded me with his eyes narrowed and his mouth set in a grim line. Hmm . . . maybe if I pissed him off enough, he’d fire me.

DON’T PUSH IT, BABE, Fang advised.

Unfortunately, Fang was right. Alejandro might still be one of the “good” vamps, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t lose his temper. I hadn’t seen that yet and wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“There are times when I forget how young you are, Slayer,” he said with a frown.

At his age, I probably did seem incredibly young. I wasn’t sure exactly how old he was, but from a few things he or the others had let slip, I believed he’d arrived in the Americas almost five hundred years ago with the Spanish conquistadors. But, just as you didn’t ask a member of the Underground what kind of demon they were, you didn’t ask a vamp how old he was.

“What does my age have to do with it?” I wanted to add, “oh ancient one” but thought better of it.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW? Fang snarked. YOU ARE DEVELOPING SOME MATURITY AFTER ALL.

I ignored him. They were probably both jealous of my youth. Not that I had any idea how old Fang was, either.

AND YOU NEVER WILL.

A bit touchy about our age, are we?

Alejandro interrupted our private chat. “With youth comes impetuosity,” the vampire said wearily. “Age and wisdom grants the ability to think something through before jumping headlong into an ill-considered action.”

“I gave Shade the car keys,” I said defensively. “And Trevor will be just fine, I’m sure.” Before he could chastise me further, I added, “Besides, after talking with Micah, I realized I might be able to find the books myself.” I explained why.

Alejandro thought for a moment, rubbing the head of the small bronze bust on his desk. From the shininess of Cortes’ dome, it looked like the vamp leader did this a lot. “I would like to see you recover the books before Mr. Jackson does,” he said. “But what if he finds them first and you aren’t present? I have no confidence he will share this information with us.”

I shrugged. “You could continue to have Shade escort him. Or Rosa. Trevor needs someone who knows the city and he likes the two of them.”

“Perhaps. Then again, perhaps it would be better if all of you accompanied him.”

I suppressed a grimace. That didn’t sound fun. “Wouldn’t you rather have me help with fighting the unaffiliated vamps? I hear that’s not going so well for you.” One of the vamps had let it slip when I arrived.

Alejandro shook his head. “We have it under control. I believe you would be best utilized in finding the books. For the rest of the night, why don’t you put some effort into locating my vehicle and Mr. Jackson, then attempt to see what you can do on your own in finding the books?”

I was on his payroll until dawn, so I nodded and left to find some privacy. The dining room was the best bet, since they rarely used it. I sighed. I wasn’t quite ready to call Shade just yet, not so soon after our argument. I could text him, but if he was driving, that could be dangerous. I’d text Andrew instead.

Fang snorted. COWARD.

I ignored him and sent a note to Andrew, asking where they were and if they were returning the car. He texted back right away, letting me know that they were returning to the mansion. They planned on being back before dawn and had talked to Trevor who intended to return to the mansion the next day.

Well, Alejandro would be happy. But I really didn’t want to see Shade again this evening, so I gave Alejandro an update and headed home, telling him I was going to try to find the books on my own.

The townhouse was quiet, so Gwen must either be asleep or working. I could never keep track of her crazy hours at the ER. But wherever she was, she’d been busy. The living room now looked as though Santa’s workshop had exploded in it. Okay, slight exaggeration, but apparently Gwen really liked Christmas. With my father being Jewish, my mother raised Catholic, and her tending toward New Age spiritualism when I was growing up, I was pretty open to whatever kind of celebration people wanted to make this time of the year.

Fang headed out the doggie door to get a little alone time, and I set up a candle on my nightstand. I lit it,

Try Me

then relaxed and stared into the flame. Finding that calm, centered place inside myself was easier now, but I usually just stayed there, enjoying the freedom from Lola's needs and resting and rejuvenating myself. Today, however, I planned to look for something specific.

I hesitated, unsure how to go about it. First, I pictured the books and tried to put them in different settings in my mind, hoping something would click. Total failure.

Next, I thought about sending out one of Lola's tendrils to find the man trapped in the books. But since this place inside me was free of Lola, that wouldn't work. I tried and failed at several other approaches, then gave up for the night.

However, I wasn't willing to give up on this lovely feeling, this wonderfully quiet, serene place. I let myself drift and just be, with no worries, no quests, no squabbles.

There, deep inside myself, someone abruptly spoke to me. *Find me!*

CHAPTER NINE

I jerked out of my trance. Whoa. There *he* was again. Who was it?

Quickly, I tried to re-enter my trance, find that thread of thought and follow it to its owner, but it was no use. My mind whirled with so many questions that I couldn't get back to that still, quiet place.

Finally, I gave up, but the speculations wouldn't stop. It was difficult to analyze with only two words, but this time the voice had definitely sounded male . . . and stressed out. Let me think . . . I'd been trying to find the books. Could it be them, reaching back to me? It didn't seem possible that books could talk, but Josh and Andrew had claimed they did. Then again, these books contained some kind of dark magick and were supposedly written by a mage demon. Who knew what all they could do?

Or maybe the voice was Trevor's father, still trapped within them. That made more sense than talking books. But if it was him, what did it mean that he was reaching out to me? Why not directly to his son? Well, maybe Trevor couldn't hear them, because of his shield. But how could he sense the books through that shield if he did come close to them? And if Trevor's father was talking to me, why would he urge Josh and Andrew to do evil then reach out to me to save him?

None of it made any sense. Maybe the voice was someone else entirely, unassociated with the books. But whoever it was, they had to know me to reach out to me. So far as I knew, all my friends and family were accounted for—no one was missing. Who else knew me well enough to contact me deep within my inner self?

I thought for a moment. The first time the voice had reached me, I'd been pretty drugged up. The second, in kind of a Zen state. That was probably the only way he could contact me.

Shoot, there were so many unanswered questions, it made my head hurt. I'd try again tomorrow. For now, it was time to sleep.

When I woke around noon the next day, Fang was cuddled up next to me. I petted him for a moment, trying to figure out what to do with my day. According to Micah, the Underground's Christmas party was today. What time?

Fang yawned. THE INVITE IS ON YOUR DRESSER.

Oh, yeah. I'd skimmed it, then tossed it there and forgot about it. I read it now. Six o'clock tonight at the club, and I was supposed to bring a wrapped ornament to exchange. What was that for?

IT'S FOR FUN, VAL, Fang said, peering out of the bedcovers at me. EVER HEARD OF IT?

Ignoring his caustic comment, I asked, “What should I get?”

USUALLY THE ONES THAT ARE REALLY ORNATE OR REALLY FUNNY DO BEST.

“Okay, I guess I’m going to the mall then.”

Fang jumped down from the bed. IT’S ABOUT TIME. YOU HAVEN’T BOUGHT ANYTHING FOR YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS YET.

Crap. He was right. I really needed to do some serious shopping.

DON’T FORGET YOUR FAITHFUL HELLHOUND. SOME NICE MEATY BONES WOULD BE GOOD. OR A PORTER-HOUSE STEAK.

I laughed. “And what are you planning to give me?”

He bowed to me, one fuzzy leg stretched forward. MY UNDYING DEVOTION.

He even managed to say that with an earnest expression. I grinned.

The bow turned into an opportunity to scratch his ear. C’MON, BABE. HOW COULD I GET YOU SOMETHING? NO MONEY, NO POCKETS, NOT ALLOWED IN STORES . . .

“I know. I was just yanking your chain.”

WELL, YOU CAN STOP NOW AND OPEN THE DOOR, OH SHE OF THE OPPOSABLE THUMBS.

I let him out, then showered and dressed. Fang stayed home while I went to Rivercenter Mall. It wasn’t the closest, but since I’d been there with Gwen before, I was a little familiar with the layout. Besides, it was at my favorite place—the River Walk. Even though it was a weekday, the place seemed packed with Christmas shoppers.

I got most of my shopping done and found an ornament I really liked—a gingerbread man that said “Bite Me.” It amused me, anyway.

I went home and dumped the gifts on my bed, then found Fang watching television on the couch. He might not have thumbs, but he was a wizard at using his claws on the remote control. He liked to watch Cesar Millan, the dog whisperer, especially the part where Cesar trained the humans to do what their dogs needed.

I rubbed his fuzzy little head. “Let me wrap this and we can go to the party.”

Fang turned off the television and jumped down from the couch. YOU’RE NOT GOING LIKE THAT, ARE YOU?

I glanced down at my clothes. It was what I wore every day—jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a vest over it to hide the stakes. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

IT’S A PARTY, VAL. DRESS UP A BIT. I grimaced and Fang added, YOU DON’T WANT TREVOR TO SHOW YOU UP, DO YOU?

Now that was a low blow. Trevor would show me up no matter what I wore. I sighed. “Okay, what should I wear?”

Fang fancied himself a fashion connoisseur, and the worst part about it was that he was far better at choosing clothes than me. He nosed through my closet and chose an outfit Mom had bought me last year for Christmas—black slacks, a satiny white blouse, and a black vest with white and red embroidered flowers. I’d never worn it because I hadn’t had an occasion—it was too dressy to wear hunting vamps.

IT COULD BE WORSE, Fang reminded me. IT COULD BE A DRESS.

Good point. Not that I owned one—they didn’t ride well on a motorcycle.

I wrapped the ornament, then futzed with my make-up and hair in the way Gwen had showed me. It didn’t look as good as when she did it for me, but at least it looked like I’d made an effort. I even tied a festive red bow around Fang’s neck. Surprisingly, he didn’t object.

As we drove to the club on my bike, I reminded myself that I needed to get on Trevor’s good side, so I probably needed to apologize. To Shade, too.

Tessa and Micah had done their best to transform the club into a festive Christmas atmosphere with lots of twinkling lights and bright decorations, despite the dark walls and club lighting. I was about a half hour late, so the party was already in full swing, with liquor flowing freely and people laughing and dancing. Tessa hovered near the door, greeting guests. I drew her aside. “Learn anything about Trevor yet?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. The LA Underground hasn’t gotten back to me.” She made a shooing motion. “Go. Mingle. Enjoy yourself. You can put your ornament under the tree.”

Mingling. Great. I glanced around and saw I actually knew more people than I had at the previous party, but most of them were in the same cluster as Shade . . . all but Josh and Andrew, of course, who were still being punished. Trevor was holding court among them, and since I wasn’t quite ready to join them, I put the ornament under the tree with the rest of the small packages and looked around for the food.

We hadn’t eaten, and Fang insisted he was starved. I filled a plate for each of us and took it to a corner where we could eat in peace. Micah had catered the dinner—turkey, roast beef, and ham with all the fixings. Delicious. I was leaning down to wipe some gravy off Fang’s fuzzy beard when someone stopped in front of me.

I looked up. Shade.

All of a sudden, the food I’d just eaten started whirling as fast as the swirls on his face. Gee, I really wished I could see his expression, get a clue as to what he was thinking and feeling. I stood, figuring that whatever he’d sought me out to say, I needed to be on my feet.

I’LL JUST LEAVE YOU TWO ALONE, Fang said, and trotted off to join the rest of the party.

Shade stood there, all swirly and enigmatic. “Val, I’m sorry. I acted like a jerk.”

Relief flooded through me, making me feel light-headed. I hadn't realized how much I regretted our fight until he apologized. I shook my head and took his hands, looking into his beautiful blue eyes. Eyes that showed no blame. "No, it was me." I swallowed hard and somehow found the guts to say, "You were right. I-I was a little jealous. I'm sorry I took it out on you."

He smiled, looking as relieved as I felt. "Good. Uh, do you realize where you're standing?"

I glanced around. "You mean the corner—I put myself in a time out?"

His grin widened. "No . . . you're right under the mistletoe."

I glanced up, but before I could spot it, he kissed me. He missed the first time, hitting my chin, but the awkwardness soon turned into something much nicer as our lips meshed and Lola rose between us, sparking all kinds of illicit thoughts. I beat her back down. Shade was mine, not hers, and I didn't want her to mingle tonight.

The kiss broke off, and Shade said, "Come on, join—"

But I didn't hear what he was about to say because Micah used the microphone to call for attention and start the ornament gift exchange. Shade led me to one of the tables near Trevor and his court, and we listened to the instructions for the exchange.

Seemed it was to be a different kind of gift opening, where people could open an ornament from under the tree or steal one from someone else. It was as fun as Fang had promised, lots of laughter and joking as people stole the most coveted ornaments. Mine was pretty popular, but the one everyone seemed to want was the one Trevor brought.

He must have had it made, because it pictured a slayer shoving a stake into a vampire's heart. The slayer resembled me, and the vamp looked a great deal like Alejandro. I wasn't sure I cared for it or its message, but everyone else seemed to really enjoy it.

At the end of the exchange, Shade had the slayer ornament while I ended up with a pretty silver and blue one that would look great in my bedroom.

The music started up again, playing an old favorite—*White Christmas*—and Trevor came over to where Shade and I sat. I plastered a smile on my face and he acted like nothing had ever happened. Good. I really didn't want to apologize to him—he didn't deserve it.

Trevor slapped Shade on the back then held out his hand to me. "Would you like to dance?"

Embarrassed, I said, "Sorry, I don't know how." Getting close enough to dance with a guy meant he'd be inside my energy field . . . and easy prey for Lola. So, I'd never learned.

"No problem," Trevor said with a wave of his hand. "Just follow my lead and you'll have no problems."

"But it's a slow dance." I wasn't sure I wanted to do that with him. And I had a good excuse. "You know, lust demon and all."

“Won’t affect me a bit,” Trevor declared, and this time I smelled the whiskey he must have been drinking.

Shade said, “Go ahead,” so I didn’t see how I could refuse. And maybe a slow dance coupled with his drinking would give me the opportunity to find out more about him. I forced a smile and took his hand.

He swept me out onto the floor, and I stumbled a couple of times until I got the hang of it. All I had to do was relax and let him push me where he wanted me, and we did just fine. Slayer reflexes didn’t hurt either.

Once I felt more secure, Trevor glanced down at me and asked disarmingly, “Why do you dislike me?”

That was certainly blunt. “Maybe I just don’t know you,” I said evasively.

“What would you like to know?”

I thought for a moment. I wasn’t real good with small talk. “Um, how about your family?”

“Well, you know about my father. My mother died in an earthquake right after I was born.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

“No. No other family. The Underground raised me.”

“That must have been tough,” I said, meaning it.

“No tougher than what I hear you went through,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

Sheesh. The Demon Underground, strangely enough, was no place to keep secrets among its members. Was he trying to say we were two of a kind? I was so not buying it. I shrugged. “My family is doing just fine now.” We were having civil conversations and everything.

“Someone told me your parents own the Astral Reflections bookstore.”

His harsh tone surprised me and I missed a step. “Yeah, they do. So?”

“So why didn’t you mention the store as a possible hiding place for the books?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t even think about it. I guess because Andrew trashed the store once looking for them without any luck. I don’t see why they’d want to hide somewhere obvious like that.” At his disbelieving stare, I added, “I can take you by tomorrow when they’re open, if you like.” I really didn’t think he’d find the books at the store. “Or Shade can. He knows where the store is.”

He seemed to relax. “Okay, let’s do that.”

As the song segued into a medley of classic Christmas songs, I took the opportunity to continue questioning him. “I didn’t know there were other Demon Undergrounds. Is the one in Los Angeles a lot like this one?”

He shrugged, looking indifferent. “I don’t know anymore. It’s been awhile since I needed their services. I have my own business.”

I hadn't even thought about what he did for a living. "Oh, what kind of business?"

"Hair salons."

"You're a hairdresser?" I asked in surprise. Though I had to admit it did fit.

"No," he said, sounding annoyed. "I *own* upscale hair salons in Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, and Hollywood. My flagship salon is on Rodeo Drive." He glanced down at me. "If you ever make it to California, stop by for a free hairstyle."

He didn't actually say I looked like I could use one, but it was implied in his tone. "Yeah," I sniped back. "I guess people out there obsess about hair." When slaying vamps, not so much.

Trevor looked at me thoughtfully, then spun me in a whirling circle that left me confused and feeling klutzy. "We're not so different, you know," he said.

Be nice, Val, I admonished myself. I didn't want this guy to see me as a threat. "Oh?"

"No, we're not. We both want the Demon Underground to remain hidden, don't we?"

I had to agree with him there. I didn't care for the idea of witch hunts, which is where I figured revealing ourselves would end up. I nodded.

"And we both would just as soon have all vampires vanish from the face of the Earth?"

Okay, I had to agree with him there, too. While I might believe Alejandro wholeheartedly believed in his Movement, would his followers revert to bloodsucking fiends given the chance? I was mostly human, and I didn't want to see any more of us die at their hands. "True." Where was he going with this?

"Don't you think it's unwise for the vampires to reveal their presence by coming out to the population?"

"I don't know. Alejandro's ideals are good—he's hoping to regulate vamps through the laws, make it safer for humans."

Trevor sneered. "Humans will never be safe around them. Why are you helping them?"

Gee, he'd never acted this way around Rosa or the other bloodsuckers he despised. Two-faced much?

"I had no choice." I explained my promise that demons wouldn't harm vampires, Josh and Andrew breaking that promise, and having to work for the Movement to make it up to them. "I'm under contract now with Alejandro."

"Does that mean you have to persuade the Underground to come out with them?" he persisted.

"Not at all. I'm not sure that's such a good idea." I'd thought about it and realized that with each generation of demons interbreeding with humans, the demon strain was getting more and more diluted, our powers weaker. In a few generations, they were likely to be totally gone, so long as no more full demons found their way into our world. Why reveal ourselves when our numbers were dwindling so fast?

“Good,” Trevor said. “I—”

He broke off when the music stopped and Fang shoved his way between us, his red bow looking a little bedraggled. HATE TO BREAK UP THIS LOVE FEST, BUT MICAH WANTS TO SEE YOU.

Good—I was tired of being on my best behavior with this guy. *Thanks*, I told Fang, and relayed to Trevor what he’d said. *I appreciate the rescue.*

NOT REALLY A RESCUE. MICAH REALLY DOES WANT YOU.

Oh. Fang led me to him, and Micah pulled me out into the hall. “Bad news,” he said, looking worried.

“Did you find out about Trevor? Did you find the books?”

Micah grimaced. “No, nothing like that. Alejandro’s been trying to call you.”

I checked my phone. Dead. I’d forgotten to charge it. “It isn’t midnight yet. My contract says I work for him midnight to dawn.”

“I know, but his mansion is under attack.”

Of course it was. When could I get a break? “By who?”

“The unaffiliated vamps who oppose the Movement. Apparently, they’ve banded together and decided to take Alejandro down.”

I sighed. “Well, fewer bloodsuckers in the world isn’t a bad thing.” Maybe they’d take each other out and end this. But Micah looked worried. “Why does this bother you?” I asked.

Fang barked at me, sounding impatient. BECAUSE JOSH AND ANDREW ARE STILL THERE, he said.

Oh, crap.

CHAPTER TEN

I might be annoyed at Andrew and Josh for pulling their stupid stunts, but I didn't want them killed. "I'll go."

"Why?" someone asked behind me.

I turned around. It was Trevor. He and Shade had followed me to see what Micah wanted.

"He never answered your question," Trevor continued. "Why does this bother you? Do you and the vamps have some sort of alliance?" he asked Micah, looking disgusted by the idea.

"Not really," Micah said with an impatient frown. "Not officially. But Alejandro and I agree the free agent vamps aren't good for either organization. Not only do they murder humans, but they have the potential to turn the world against us. Do you want to see another Inquisition . . . or Salem witch trials?"

"No, but—"

Micah cut Trevor off with an impatient gesture. "Two of our own are at the mansion tonight. We're going to help them."

Trevor looked annoyed, but he couldn't argue with that. He compressed his lips into a thin line and nodded.

Relieved that Micah was going to provide some backup, I signaled the DJ to turn off the music and handed the mic to Micah.

Nodding his thanks, Micah spoke into the mic, glancing around at the curious crowd. "I apologize for interrupting your good time, but Andrew and Josh are in trouble. They're at the Movement's mansion, which is being attacked by the independent vampires. We need to help them. Who's in?"

About two-thirds of the crowd volunteered, including Shade and Trevor.

Uh-oh. Some of them had no business battling bloodsuckers. I grabbed the mic. "This isn't a picnic, people. Some of you will get hurt, maybe even killed. If you're not accustomed to fighting vamps or don't have a power that will help, stay here." Some of them looked mutinous, so I added bluntly, "We don't want to get hurt because we're worried about protecting you."

Micah took the mic back and was a bit more diplomatic. "The Slayer has an excellent point. I don't want anyone hurt. I commend you all for wanting to go, but please don't unless you have a good reason to be there. I wouldn't want to have your injuries on my conscience."

That was a better way to phrase it. I guess that's why he was the boss and I wasn't.

YEP, Fang agreed, then poked me hard with his nose. LET'S RIDE.

Just a sec. I had one more thing to take care of. "Shade, you stay here, too."

I couldn't see his expression, but his voice was hard as he said, "I may not be able to fight, but I can heal others."

"I know, but you can do that here, after it's over. Remember what happened the last time we fought at the mansion?" He'd lost his temper and almost lost control of his interdimensional energies. If I hadn't distracted him with Lola, he would've let more full-blooded demons pour into our world through the rift he created. With no human blood to give them compassion, they'd wreak havoc on San Antonio and the rest of the world.

Shade had vowed to kill himself rather than let that happen. "It's too dangerous," I reminded him. And I couldn't be of any help if I had to worry about him.

Trevor slapped him on the back with a rueful look. "Val's right. I'll stay here with you, Shade. I won't be of any use there either, but I can help you get ready for any wounded."

I felt pulled in two directions. I needed to leave and help the two demons at the mansion, but had to make sure Shade stayed here. As Fang almost vibrated with the need for us to be on our way, I waited anxiously for Shade's answer.

He took a quick step forward then grabbed me by the shoulders. "Okay, you're right. But I don't have to like it."

Relieved by the resolve in his face, I said, "Thank you."

"But be careful, damn it," he muttered. "Come back to me." With that, he gave me a hard kiss.

Lola wanted to stay and linger, but now was *so* not the time. I kissed him back fiercely, a promise to return and pick up where we left off. "I will." I gave him another swift kiss for good luck, then ran like hell out of there to grab my Valkyrie, Fang hot on my heels.

The hellhound jumped into his seat behind me and we didn't bother with his goggles—it would take too much time. I gunned it out of there and broke more than a few speed limits as I headed for the mansion. I passed a few of the other demons who'd left immediately and, because I could weave in and out of traffic on my bike, I was the first one there.

The iron gates had been smashed and lay broken off their hinges to either side of the entrance. Three vamps stood in the space between them, as if they'd been waiting for us. They snarled when they saw me and rushed forward, fangs gleaming. Okay, obviously *not* part of the Movement. That made things easier.

Lola's lust for the fight sizzled in my blood, and I quickly sent Fang a mental picture of what I intended to do. As we got close, he leapt off the bike, launching straight into the face of the one on the far right. I turned my bike into a skid and leaned over parallel to the ground, right in the path of the two on the left.

They screamed as the Valkyrie's wheels hit them in the shins and flipped them, the bike going down hard. I scrambled off and grabbed my stakes out of my back waistband, cursing the pain in my side. Sure, they might not be going anywhere on those legs anytime soon, but two less bad ass vamps in the world was a Good Thing. I staked them, putting them out of their misery, then turned to see how Fang was doing.

He'd used teeth and claws to make the guy's face pretty well unrecognizable, and was now leaping up to take bites out of anything he could, while the bloodsucker screamed like a sissy, trying fruitlessly to kick Fang away. Another stake took care of him. So far, so good.

You okay? I asked Fang.

I'M GOOD, Fang said immediately. IDIOT COULDN'T EVEN AIM. His gaze focused beyond me. WATCH OUT!

Another bloodsucker, who must have been hiding in the bushes, tackled me on my injured side and took me down. The pain almost crippled me, and all I could do was lie there and fend him off as he lay on top of me, scrabbling to find my neck with his fangs. Then, as Lola's energy field took effect, he tried to feel me up even as his fangs scraped my neck, seeking my jugular.

The guy must be nuts. Repulsed and pissed off, but unable to breathe well, I gathered all of Lola's force and thrust it at him. "Stop!" I controlled his mind utterly, so he had no choice but to do what I told him to. Annoyed, but stakeless at the moment, I snarled, "Go kill yourself."

He immediately stood, then took a running jump and leaped up with his arms spread wide toward one of the broken gates and smashed down hard on several of the *fleur de lis* spikes, impaling himself. He must have hit his heart, because he went limp and our connection faded and broke.

Ohmigod, I hadn't thought he'd actually *do* it. I stared at his body, horrified that Lola could compel someone to do something like that.

I heard a motor behind me and someone said, "Interesting. I didn't know you could do that."

I turned around to see Ludwig and several others staring at me from inside a car. Some looked as appalled as I felt.

"I didn't either," I snapped, struggling to my feet and trying not to show how much my side hurt. "But the other option was to tell him to go screw himself." I paused to gasp for breath. "And who wants to witness that?"

Ludwig gave me a lopsided grin as the others chuckled nervously. "Out," Ludwig told the others. "Let's clear this garbage out of the way. The others are right behind me."

As Ludwig and his helpers pulled the vamps to the side, I grabbed my bike and sped up the long driveway to the house, Fang running alongside. This time, I babied the Valkyrie, letting it down easy onto some grass on the side of the drive, and paused to assess what was going on in the chaos outside the mansion. I could see pretty well under the full moon.

Dozens of vamps fought other bloodsuckers fang to fang all around the house. Without a scorecard, I could-

n't tell which were the good guys and which were the bad. Either way, it didn't matter. I needed to make sure Micah's guys were safe. Were they in the house?

As I watched, a vamp tried to climb in a shattered window and a fireball blew him back out, the intense heat engulfing him in flames instantly. Since there were several other crispy critters on the ground near him, it looked like Andrew had been busy. Josh popped his head out and quickly blasted the flames licking around the window frame with a fire extinguisher, then ducked back inside. Ah, good. They were both still alive.

Determined to keep them that way, I ran over to the door, Fang right on my heels. Dang. The thing wouldn't budge.

THEY PROBABLY HAVE IT BLOCKED, Fang said.

Of course. Turning to the side, I yelled, "Josh, Andrew, let me in!"

Josh looked out at me in surprise, then nodded and disappeared. I heard a thump, then Rosa opened the door and gestured me in urgently. Three vamps with stakes in their hearts lay scattered among the Christmas decorations in the great room, broken glass glittering on the floor. Luis guarded the window on the side next to Andrew and Josh, while two other vamps I didn't know covered the windows on the other side. I don't know if Luis even realized he had a bloody shard of glass sticking in his back.

Rosa pushed the door closed and dropped a large wooden bar into the iron brackets on either side of the door. It settled with a thunk. Sheesh—now I realized why that door was so massive. It could withstand a siege . . . and probably had. I'd never noticed the bar before.

"Josh, Andrew, are you okay?" I asked.

They gave me a thumbs-up then quickly returned their attention to what was going on outside.

Rosa said, "They are fine. Come, Alejandro needs you."

"But I have to—"

"We will protect them." She tugged on my arm. "Please, you must see Alejandro now. The prophecy said you must be by his side."

Sheesh, they were taking it a bit literally, weren't they?

Go, Fang said. THE BOYS ARE OKAY AND I'LL WATCH, TOO. I'LL CALL YOU IF WE NEED YOU.

They'd kept Josh and Andrew safe so far, so I guessed it was all right. "Where is he?" I asked her.

"At the back of the house."

"Okay, I'll go. You stay here." Then, hearing a pounding at the front door, I remembered Ludwig and his friends. "Some of the Underground are right behind me. If you let them in, they'll help you defend the house. We can't tell friend from foe out there."

Rosa nodded, then pushed me toward the back of the house. “Go quickly.”

I went.

Alejandro was at the more vulnerable back door, barricading it with the dining room table and the help of Austin and two other vamps. Something thumped against it and the door bulged inward. “Hold fast,” he shouted. “Do not let them have our home!”

A fist smashed through the top half from the outside, splintering the heavy wood. Sheesh, I knew they were strong, but that had to hurt. Why were they so desperate?

Alejandro cursed, and Austin said, “They must be crazy.”

As two hands tore at the hole in the door, I asked, “How can I help?”

Alejandro glanced at me in surprise. “Slayer—excellent. Perhaps you would be so good as to use your powers to stop these creatures?” Even hard-pressed as he was, he still had time to be gracious.

I hesitated for a moment. Use my powers? I didn’t care to dip into that well too often. Not only because I feared one day I would go too far, too deep, and Lola would take over forever, but also because I hadn’t wanted to undermine Alejandro’s authority again. “But there are some women out there, not all our side.” There weren’t that many, but what if I enslaved the men and left the women free to murder at will? “My powers only work on men.”

“But mine work on women,” Micah said from behind me.

I whirled around. He certainly had gotten here fast.

“Excellent,” Alejandro said with a grim smile. “Between the two of you, you can contain this.”

“Okay,” I said, “but it’s difficult to be selective. It’ll affect everyone,” I warned him. Including Alejandro. Again.

“I know, but please, do it quickly.”

I glanced at Micah. “You ready?”

He nodded. “Let me know when you’re ready so we can do this simultaneously.”

I’d never tried to enslave this many before. I braced myself in a wide stance, closed my eyes, and dug down deep. Lola was ready, waiting in anticipation. Knowing how many men were out there, I couldn’t do this piecemeal, couldn’t let her out slowly through my barriers. It had to be all or nothing.

Yet still I hesitated, unsure how to maintain control.

A loud crash sounded from the area near the door. “Ms. Shapiro, please,” Alejandro pleaded.

Oh, crap. Guess I just had to let go and find out what happened. “Now!” I told Micah.

I let loose and Lola exploded from my core, blasting out tendrils of energy like heat-seeking missiles, each honing in on a prime lusty male. As Lola found each one, she hooked into their sacral chakra, the center that housed the source of their sexuality.

I was spread too thin to let the energy reach out into their other chakras, so I had to be content with this one. Lola certainly was, and she was soaking up their energy like she was a dry shriveled-up sponge. It became strangely quiet inside and outside the mansion as Micah did the same.

I fought against Lola, struggling with the tightrope act of trying to hold onto them all while simultaneously trying *not* to draw in too much of their energy. I fell to my hands and knees with the effort, feeling like a black widow at the center of her web. I tried to isolate the sticky strand holding Alejandro hostage, but I had so many threads going in so many directions, it was impossible. The sheer vitality flowing into me, from all around me, was intoxicating and distracting. Besides, I feared if I let one go, I had to let them all go.

I felt Fang lick my face. ARE YOU OKAY IN THERE, VAL?

I couldn't spare any effort for speech. *Not . . . really.* I was barely holding onto control, trying to throttle Lola's siphoning down to a trickle as I desperately tried to figure out what to do. They were immobilized all right, but how could I sort friend from foe when most of them couldn't even see or hear me? All they knew was that they were drawn to me, completely enthralled by the succubus inside me.

VAL, Fang said urgently, MORE DEMONS HAVE ARRIVED. THEY'RE ATTACKING ALL OF THE VAMPS, NOT JUST THE BAD ONES. YOU HAVE TO STOP THEM.

No way. I was already feeling the strain of holding onto too many men. *Get . . . Micah . . . to help.*

I DON'T THINK HE CAN. HE HASN'T DONE THIS BEFORE LIKE YOU HAVE. HE CAN'T MOVE FROM WHERE HE IS WITHOUT RELEASING SOME OF THE WOMEN UNTIL HE FIGURES OUT HOW TO HANDLE IT. THE DEMONS ARE ALL MEN—YOU CAN DO IT.

Oh, crap. I had to. I stretched myself and found a small bit of unused capacity. Peeling it away from my core, I thrust it toward the front of the mansion. Unerringly, Lola found the chakras of nine more males and locked on like a vacuum cleaner on maximum suction.

It was overwhelming . . . it was wonderful. It was oh so right. More . . . I needed more. Their energy made me feel as if I were crackling with vitality, wildly alive. I opened the floodgates and let it pour in.

VAL, STOP. YOU'RE TAKING TOO MUCH!

No. It felt so good. It was my right, my destiny, my—

I felt a blow to my head and the tendrils all spasmed in surprise. No, I was losing them! I tried to gather up my errant strands, but another blow to the head made all my lovely threads snap. The incredible pain of the recoil sent me spiraling down into oblivion.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I rode my Valkyrie around San Antonio, desperately looking for the books, but having no success. Trevor had searched the whole city and so had I, but neither of us had been able to sense the encyclopedia. Maybe we were wrong. Maybe the books weren't in the city. Maybe Andrew had time to take them to Lytle or Castroville.

Maybe they're still in San Antonio and you're searching in the wrong place.

I seized on that thought as if it were my own. But what could we possibly do differently?

Look somewhere else. Look up—

The voice abruptly cut off. Look up what? What am I supposed to look up?

The next thing I knew, I was riding on a rough dirt road on a balmy Spring day, the tall grass of a prairie skimming by in a blur of motion on either side of me. Nothing to see for miles and miles except the grass and a small wooden house set back a short distance from the road. And best of all, my worry was gone.

Suddenly noticing I was thirsty, I brought the motorcycle to a halt next to the well on the property. I brought a dipperful of cool water to my mouth, reveling in the way it quenched my thirst completely.

Fang wandered out onto the porch from inside the house. WELCOME HOME, VAL.

That's right, this was my home. I moved leisurely into my house and stopped inside the living room. From the outside, you wouldn't know that this elegant powder blue and chocolate brown oasis waited inside. I had everything I needed here. Computer, Internet, television . . . and no men. None for many, many miles. I sank down onto the luxurious couch and relaxed when it cradled me perfectly. Here I could be alone, be myself, with nothing and no one to bother me.

Fang curled up beside me. LIFE IS VERY, VERY GOOD, he said with a sigh.

Huh? What was wrong with Fang? And who wanted to be alone?

Something unseen soothed me, made me settle back into the couch.

"Val, you're home," Tessa exclaimed as she came into the room. "Come on, everyone, the party's on!"

I glanced up, surprised to see all my female friends coming in through the door. Gwen, Mood, Shawndra, my sister Jen, Lt. Ramirez's wife—even some female demons from the Underground I'd seen but never spoken to. They poured into the room and filled it up, each one bringing something to eat.

“What’s going on?” I asked with a smile.

“It’s a girl’s night out,” Tessa said. “We’re going to pig out, have facials, give each other manis and pedis, and gossip to our heart’s content.”

I clapped my hands. “That sounds like fun.”

Insert record-scratching noise here. Huh? Had I been lobotomized . . . or Stepfordized or something? What the heck was wrong with me? This dream sucked.

I forced myself to consciousness. Pain awaited me there, but it was so much better than this disturbing dream.

“I’m losing her,” I heard someone say.

For a moment, I lay there, fuzzy but awake, trying to figure out what was happening. My head felt tender and pain pricked along my nerves, but I was lying on something soft that cushioned me, with Fang curled up beside me. What was going on?

I blinked open my eyes and stared into a familiar face. His name escaped me for a moment then the fog cleared from my brain and I remembered. “Kyle.” The dream demon. “What were you doing inside my dream?” I asked indignantly, then winced as pain shot along my abused nerve endings.

Kyle looked rueful. “Trying to help.”

I gaped at him. “By giving me longings for manis and pedis?”

Fang chuckled beside me. GIVE THE KID A BREAK. HE WAS TRYING TO KEEP YOU IN A HAPPY DREAM SO YOU WOULDN’T WAKE UP. NOT HIS FAULT HE DOESN’T KNOW YOU VERY WELL.

I guess. I glanced around, noticing that I was in my own bedroom, with Kyle, Shade, Micah and Gwen all standing around, staring down at me. *Wizard of Oz* time again.

Gwen busied herself by my bedside table then handed me some pills and a cup of water. “Here, take these. It’ll help with the pain.”

I took them gratefully then settled back on my pillow.

Shade squeezed my hand, looking anxious. “Good. Now that you’re conscious, I can heal you. A lot of people have volunteered to let me use their energy to heal you and can be here in a matter of minutes.”

“No, wait,” I said as my last conscious moments started to come back to me. “First, tell me what happened.” I lifted my hand to my head, wondering why it didn’t hurt more. “Did someone break free of my hold and wallop me?”

“No,” Micah said. “That was me.”

That didn’t make sense. “*You* hit me? Why?”

His mouth formed into a grim line. “Because you lost control. You were in the process of totally draining every man there but me. Someone had to stop you, and only Fang and I could do it.”

I gasped as the full memory of what I’d done filled my mind. Ohmigod. I covered my face with my hands, too ashamed to look them in the eyes. I’d become what I most despised. The worst part of it was, I couldn’t even blame Lola for this. As Micah constantly reminded me, there was no Lola. There was no separate demon hiding inside me. It was all me—and when it came down to it, I’d enjoyed the hell out of being a succubus. “I’m a monster,” I moaned. How could they even stand to be around me?

Fang snorted in disbelief.

Micah echoed him. “You are *not* a monster. Because if you are, then I am, too, and I refuse to believe that.”

Surprisingly, another voice joined the party. **DON’T BE SILLY. YOU’RE NOTHING OF THE KIND.**

Princess, Fang’s part-hellhound girlfriend, jumped up on the foot of the bed. And Princess was always blunt, more so than even me. What she thought—and sometimes what other people thought—came right out of her mouth. I guess if Princess said I wasn’t a monster, then it must be true. And no one else looked horrified, just concerned.

The painkillers Gwen had given me kicked in and the pain eased, helping me relax a little. “Maybe not,” I admitted. “But why not? What happened? I know I lost control. Did I . . . did I . . . ?” I had to know if I’d sucked everyone dry, but I just couldn’t form the words.

Micah glanced uncertainly at Gwen. Good point—she didn’t need to hear this.

She patted my arm and smiled, saying, “I’ll just go fix you some soup.”

Kyle patted me awkwardly on the shoulder. “I’ll help.”

Strangely, his touch made calm spread through me. When they were gone, I was left alone with Shade, Micah and Fang. I gulped. “What happened? Is it bad?”

Micah pulled up a chair next to my bed as Shade sat next to me and took my hand again. “Not as bad as it could have been,” he said. When I bit my lip, he added hastily, “You didn’t kill anyone. Fang alerted me to the problem so I could stop you. Sorry, I didn’t know any other way except to knock you out.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said hurriedly. “You did the right thing—and thank heavens you did.” The relief was incredible. I didn’t want to kill anyone in that way. I thought for a moment, then clutched Shade’s hand tighter. “Are you sure I didn’t drain anyone?” It had seemed awfully close.

“Not a one. But you did bring them to the brink. They’re all exhausted, but they’ll live.”

Fang snorted. **ALL BUT THE ONES THAT WERE EXECUTED, YOU MEAN.**

“Executed?” I said in surprise.

Shade frowned. “She doesn’t need to know about this right now.”

“Yes, she does,” I insisted. “Tell me what happened. I need to know.”

When Micah hesitated, Fang said, SHE HAS A RIGHT TO KNOW. He snuggled closer. RELAX, AND I’LL SHOW YOU HOW IT WAS.

I relaxed and closed my eyes, anxious to know what had happened. Suddenly, it was as if I was seeing through Fang’s eyes. We were back in the mansion, and I saw myself drop to all fours on the floor, looking strained and haggard. All of the colors seemed washed out, and everything looked about four feet higher than I expected. Wow—I was really seeing this from Fang’s perspective. *I didn’t know you could do this.*

QUIET, WOMAN, AND LET ME SHOW YOU, Fang said tartly. THIS AIN’T EASY, YOU KNOW.

I shut up and relaxed into the experience. I did want to know what had happened.

Fang resumed the vision with me on all fours, my face stretched in a ghastly smile.

Fang skipped out of the way and Micah, looking determined, walloped Val upside the head with his fist. She fell to the floor and flopped like a fish on the line, but didn’t let go of her prizes. Micah hit her again and she went limp and still.

SHE’S OUT, Fang confirmed, feeling worried. BUT SHE’LL LIVE. HOW ABOUT THEM?

Micah was bent over with his hands on his knees. He gasped, “Just a moment. I can’t . . . lose control either.”

Leaving Micah to regain control of the chicks he had under his incubus spell, Fang trotted over to where the vamps lay still and poked Alejandro with his nose. The vamp leader wasn’t breathing, but bloodsuckers didn’t have to. Who knew if he was dead or not? They could take a lot of abuse, so he was probably still alive. Fang hoped so—he knew Val would be upset if she’d killed her boss.

What about the demons? He went to the living room and stuck his nose in Andrew’s face. Still breathing. Good. But since Micah was bound to release the female bloodsuckers sooner or later, the boss needed to know who was good and who was apt to separate his blood from his body.

THE BABE IN HERE IS ONE OF THE GOOD GUYS, Fang called out mentally. WHY DON’T YOU LET HER GO SO WE CAN SORT THE GOOD FROM THE PUTRID?

Micah came stumbling back in, the strain of holding the women on his face. It had to be what? A whole dozen? Val could do far more than that with nothing but the power in her pinkie, Fang thought with pride. Then again, Micah hadn’t had as much practice.

THIS ONE, Fang said, poking his nose into Rosa’s ankle. LET HER TELL YOU WHICH WOMEN YOU CAN LET GO AND WHICH ARE TOAST.

Micah nodded, and released Rosa alone with a visible effort.

She came back to life with a start and stared around herself in disbelief.

“I have all of the other women under my control,” Micah said, his voice strained. “I’m drawing them in. They’re . . . at the door. Can you . . . let them in?”

She did and fourteen of them filed in, staring at Micah like he was all that and a bag of chips.

Micah grimaced. “Tell me which . . . ones are on your side . . . I’ll release them.”

Rosa nodded grimly then picked up three crossbow darts from the floor and bam, bam, bam, slammed them into the hearts of three vampires. They crumpled to the floor.

Fang scratched his ear. WELL, THAT’S ONE WAY TO DO IT.

Micah jerked, looking horrified. In his shock, he must have released the other women in his power, because they suddenly looked less like adoring groupies and more like vengeful harpies.

They grabbed crossbow bolts and stakes from the supplies on the floor. Some even grabbed glass icicles from the tree. They all headed for the door, murder in their eyes.

“Wait,” Micah said. “You can’t do this when they’re helpless.”

Rosa turned and glared at him. “Of course we can. When better?”

“It’s not right. I-I can stop you.”

She frowned. “Why would you? They are filth, scum, nothing but rabid dogs.”

Another woman spat on one of the stakes. “They are worse than that. Do you know what they did to one of your own?”

“No, what?” someone asked from the doorway—Jacob, one of the older demons, who’d arrived too late for the main event. “What did they do?”

Rosa stalked to the study and flung open the door. “See for yourself. We tried to rescue her, but it was too late.”

Fang pushed through a forest of legs to see who was inside. All he could see was a body sprawled on the floor, pale arms outflung, her head facing the doorway. A head with green hair. *Oh, damn*, he thought with regret.

“Shawndra,” Jacob cried out, falling to his knees beside the demon girl. “My God, there are bite marks everywhere. They drained her dry!”

“Why?” Micah asked in despair. “She wouldn’t harm a fly” He glanced up, suddenly alert. “But that doesn’t make sense. Demon blood makes vampires crazy.”

Rosa nodded grimly. “And so it did. They dragged her to our front lawn and ravaged her with much joy, shouting that demon blood would make them invincible.” Her fists tightened on the weapons she held. “Even if they wake, they will still be mad.”

No wonder the vamps had all seemed so nutso.

Micah nodded grimly. "I won't stop you from doing what you have to do."

With that, the women gathered up all the weapons they could and left the house to do some selective termination.

Fang stopped his memories there. THEN WE DRAGGED ALL THE GOOD GUYS INSIDE, LEFT THE BADDIES TO FRY IN THE MORNING SUN, AND BROUGHT YOU HERE.

I'd seen a lot of carnage in my day, but I thanked Fang for not showing me the rest. Yes, it needed to be done, but it was still horrifying. "Poor Shawndra." I'd hardly known the girl, but she deserved better than that. To have her life cut so short was a tragedy. "Where is she now? Is she still at the mansion?"

Micah shook his head. "We buried her yesterday."

"Yesterday! How long have I been out?"

"Three days," Shade said, squeezing my hand. "You see why we were so concerned?"

Micah nodded. "Shade and Fang never left your side. Fang knew how much pain you were in, so Kyle tried to keep you in healing dreams for as long as possible."

"And now that you're awake, I can heal you," Shade said once again.

Shade shot Micah a stubborn look. Wonder what that was about?

Princess spoke up again. MICAH SAID HE HAS TO ASK YOU, THAT YOU WOULDN'T WANT TO BE HEALED, the part hellhound, part Cavalier King Charles Spaniel said, letting everyone in the room hear her. WHY WOULD YOU WANT TO HURT?

"I don't. But when Shade healed Josh, he almost lost control. He'd rather kill himself than let that happen. I don't want him dead. Do you?" That wasn't the only reason, of course, but it was all she had to know.

Princess jumped up to place her front paws on Shade's chest and stare into his face. DON'T HEAL HER, she ordered. OR ANYONE ELSE.

Now *that* she could have kept private, but obviously chose not to. Fang snorted, though whether in amusement or disgust, I wasn't sure.

Shade patted Princess on the head then put her paws gently back down on the bed. "You're overdramatizing this, Val. You're not hurt as badly as Josh was, so it will be easier on me. There's no danger. Besides, you and Micah are here to help me recover afterward."

I smiled at him, to take the sting out of my words. "If I'm not hurt as badly, then I really don't need healing, do I?"

"What?" he challenged. "Do you think you deserve to suffer or something?"

Try Me

I patted his hand. “Now who’s being overdramatic? I’m not suffering, especially after the pills Gwen gave me.”

THAT’S RIGHT, SHE’S FINE, Princess said with finality.

SHE REALLY IS, Fang added. AND SHE’D BE EVEN BETTER IF YOU’D STOP PUSHING.

I rubbed Fang’s head. *Thanks for the support.*

DE NADA.

Shade looked taken aback, but Micah dropped a hand on his shoulder. “They’re right. We all appreciate your offer, but it isn’t necessary.”

Shade’s mouth firmed into a line. “I just wanted to help.”

“I know,” I said, rubbing his arm to soothe him. “I’d feel the same way. But it’s not necessary. I’m not feeling all that bad. Just a little weak . . . and hungry.” I added the last to refocus his attention elsewhere, but I realized it was true. After all, I’d been in bed for three days without, I assumed, anything to eat.

Right on cue, Kyle knocked on the door, then pushed it open to admit Gwen, carrying a tray. “You should eat something,” she said with a stubborn look around the room, as if daring one of them to argue with her.

Shade hurried to take the tray from her. “Yes, you should,” he said.

He waited while Micah helped me sit up and Gwen fussed with the pillows behind me. When they were done, Shade placed the tray gently in front of me.

“Smells great,” I said. And it did. A hearty beef soup with chunks of potatoes and vegetables, with a side of crusty French bread and creamy butter. Boy, did I have a great roomie or what? I took a bite. “Delicious as always.” I glanced around. “Have the rest of you eaten?”

Micah nodded. “Just before you woke.” He smiled at my roomie. “Gwen always takes good care of us.”

She shrugged. “One of my few accomplishments. I’m just glad to have someone to cook for.”

I’M HUNGRY, Princess complained.

Fang scrambled to his feet on the bed. I COULD EAT, TOO.

“The dogs want food,” I translated for Gwen.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot,” she said with a smile. “I’ll get them something.”

Both hellhounds jumped down off the bed to follow her. THAT SOUP SMELLS GOOD, Princess said, hinting strongly as she left the room.

I grinned then glanced around at the guys who were left. “So, instead of watching me eat, why don’t you tell me

what's been happening." Besides Shawndra's death and the Christmas massacre. "Did Trevor find the books?"

"Not yet," Shade said. "He's been calling me every day to check on you, and each time, he tells me he hasn't found them yet."

To check on me? Yeah, right. More likely he was checking on Shade to see when he'd be free to come out and play. I thought about telling them about the voice I'd been hearing, but decided not to. It would be too easy for Shade to let it slip to Trevor, and for some reason, I didn't want to let the visiting demon know about it.

"Where has he looked?" I asked, then continued to slurp up the soup.

"Everywhere," Shade said. "He's going to check the whole city again, in case he missed something the first time. Then he's planning on moving to some of the nearby towns that Andrew would have had time to get to."

I nodded then got busy finishing the soup as I thought about that voice again. What did it want me to look up? I didn't have a clue to even go about it, but I knew someone who would—Rick, my stepfather.

I paused with the spoon halfway to my mouth as I remembered something. Oh, crap. Would Rick still be speaking to me? I'd sicced Trevor on him, so to speak. "Did Trevor visit Astral Reflections?" I asked in trepidation. "He seemed convinced the books would be there."

"Yes, he did," Shade confirmed.

I set my spoon down. "Oh, no. Did he tear the place up?" Would Mom and Rick ever forgive me?

Micah shook his head solemnly. "It's worse than that."

"What?" I demanded. "Did he hurt them?" If he harmed a single hair on their heads—

"Nothing like that," Micah said with a grin. "They think he's wonderful and invited him to join you for Christmas dinner."

CHAPTER TWELVE

I closed my eyes, my appetite suddenly gone. “They invited Trevor to our family Christmas? You’re kidding me.” Please, goddess, let it be a joke.

“Nope,” Micah said. “Afraid not.”

Damn. “Since when are Mom and Rick so gung-ho about associating with demons?”

“They invited me, too,” Shade said stiffly. “Is there a problem?”

“Of course not.” Shade had spent Thanksgiving with my family and they really liked him, swirls and all . . . but Trevor? He was so not their new age-y type. “I was just surprised, that’s all,” I fibbed. And I had a couple of weeks to make sure Trevor was *un*invited.

“He’s really a good guy once you get to know him,” Shade said. “He’s been worried about you.”

I didn’t want to start a fight again, so I said, “Okay,” and changed the subject. “Uh, what am I wearing under here? I kinda need to use the bathroom.” I raised the covers and saw I was wearing a sleep T-shirt. Good. But . . . “Who undressed me?” I wasn’t wearing a bra anymore so I kinda wondered who had seen me partially naked.

“Gwen and Tessa,” Micah told me. “After we brought you back from the mansion.”

Good. It would have kind of weirded me out to know it was Micah . . . or Shade, when I wasn’t even conscious. I threw back the covers and scooted to the side of the bed then dangled my legs over the side. The T-shirt came down to mid-thigh, so I felt covered up enough. I stood and immediately, all three guys moved forward, arms outstretched to help.

“I’m good,” I told them. A little wobbly, but I could stand and was sure I could move on my own. “Remember, I heal pretty fast. Since you kept me out of it for so long, I was able to heal more than I thought. And the soup helped, too.”

It really had. I just had a bit of jangling along my nerves and some pain in my chakras from the backlash of Lola’s tendrils. Even that was easing with the painkillers Gwen had given me. And my side didn’t hurt at all.

“Okay,” Shade said, handing me my robe. “But I’ll stay close, just in case.”

Whatever it took to make him happy. I smiled at him and slipped on my robe, then made my way slowly to the bathroom. I gained confidence with each step. No problem. I was a bit weak still from so many days in bed, but a little food and time would take care of that.

I closed the bathroom door gently in his face, relieved to be away from so many pairs of staring eyes. I took longer than I needed, just to have some alone time, and looked at myself in the mirror. Good grief, I looked ghastly. My normally tamed shoulder-length brown hair was tangled and messy, and my face was creased and as pale as a vampire's, with dark smudges under my eyes.

I stuck my head out the door. "I feel okay, so I'm going to take a shower," I told Shade.

"Okay, but don't lock the door, and yell if you need help."

"I will," I said. As if.

I enjoyed the hot pounding water for a few blissful minutes, then checked my side and my head. I had a couple of round, pink scars where the crossbow bolt had skewered me, but otherwise, I was totally healed. And I had a sensitive spot on my head where Micah had hit me, but no bump or gash. What were they all worried about? I was fine.

But how was Lola? Had the recoil whiplash fried my succubus circuits, so to speak? Checking deep inside, I could sense the succubus still there. Hiding and hurting, but with enough sucked-up sexual energy to power her for days. I didn't know whether to be glad or sad that I still had her around.

Then again, she was probably the reason I was healing so well. Remembering how alive and vital I'd felt the last time she gathered up that much energy, I realized that without it, I'd probably still be in a world of hurt. I might even miss her if she was gone.

Not that I'd admit it . . .

I got out of the shower and was glad to see someone had slipped in and left me some clean clothes. Good—the T-shirt I'd been wearing was grungy after so many days of wear, even in bed. I dressed and checked myself in the mirror. I had more color in my face and my hair looked better now that I'd shampooed it, so I toweled it as dry as I could and combed it free of the tangles.

Feeling more human, I left the bathroom to find Shade waiting to escort me back to bed and the other two hovering in the hallway. I passed my bedroom door and headed for the living room.

"Where are you going?" Micah asked.

"I'm not an invalid," I told him. "I just want to sit up for awhile."

They followed me into the bright, cheerful living room where Gwen was watching television and eating popcorn with both hellhounds lying on the couch next to her. Both watched her every move.

Mooch, I accused Fang with a grin.

SO? I LIKE POPCORN, he said. ESPECIALLY WITH ALL THE GOOD STUFF GWEN PUTS ON IT.

It was a good thing hellhounds had a constitution of iron and the metabolism of a hummingbird. He jumped down and nosed Princess to do the same so I could sit next to Gwen.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“Much.” I smiled at the guys, as if to say, “See, the nurse isn’t concerned. You shouldn’t be either.” Out loud, I said, “While I was in the bathroom, I realized the energy I took in boosted my healing more than usual, and I still have more to draw on.”

Micah and Kyle sat in the two club chairs, and Gwen scooted over so Shade could sit next to me. He twined his fingers with mine. “Good,” he said with a sigh and finally seemed to relax.

Nice. I let myself slump against him, enjoying the feel of his warm body next to mine, knowing that Lola was too out of it to attack him. I needed to enjoy this while it lasted.

“What time is it?” I asked, noticing it was dark outside. “Is Alejandro expecting me?”

“It’s past midnight,” Shade told me. “And you’re not seriously thinking about going over there tonight, are you?”

“No need,” Micah broke in before I could say anything. “I talked to him while you were in the shower to let him know you’re up and about. He knows you need to recuperate and told me to tell you to take all the time you need. He isn’t expecting you back for days. And, when I visited him yesterday, he told me how much he appreciates what you did for him. Besides, he and his people need some time to recoup as well. You really took a lot out of them.”

I grimaced. “And he *appreciates* that?”

“Yes,” Micah said in a firm tone. “You brought the carnage down to a manageable level and ensured he didn’t lose any more people . . . at great cost to yourself. He’s very grateful.”

“But doesn’t this make him more vulnerable?” I asked.

Micah shrugged. “It might have, but the women weren’t affected, so they’ve been in charge while the men re-charge.”

Fang chuckled on the floor beside me. **I BET ROSA’S LOVING THAT.**

Micah grinned. “You could say that. She’s certainly protective of the men, and has all the women in the Movement cleaning up the mansion, inside and out. It’s spotless.” He paused, then said, “At least one very good thing has come out of this.”

“What’s that?” I couldn’t imagine what it could be.

“Luis told us how well Josh and Andrew helped them defend the mansion, so they all agreed the boys have served their allotted time and released them.”

“Luis said that? Will wonders never cease”

Shade squeezed my hand. “So what are you going to do with your free time? I hope you’re planning on taking it easy.”

“Oh, yeah.” I mulled it over for a moment. “I think I’ll just veg, maybe spend some time with Mom and Rick. They could use some help at the store this time of year, and it sounds like a nice change.” Shade tensed up beside me. “Don’t worry—I’ll take it easy. I might do some research on the books, too, while you help Trevor search for them.”

There. That ought to appease him. Not that I wanted those two becoming buddy-buddy any more than necessary, but someone should be with Trevor when he found the books . . . and Rosa was obviously busy.

Shade nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

Kyle and Micah left then, to go to the club, and the rest of us watched a silly movie about zombies. When it was over, Shade and Princess left, and Fang, Gwen and I all hit the sack.

I felt even better the next morning when I woke up. I tried lying in bed for awhile and encouraging the voice to come back to me, but no luck.

Now what? I could probably go back to work this evening, but heck, I’d been given the option of a few days off and I planned to take them.

WE DESERVE IT, Fang declared.

We do indeed.

So we goofed off for awhile and headed over to Astral Reflections at noon. Mom, Rick, and Jen were all there, and the store wasn’t too crowded.

“Val!” Rick exclaimed and came over to greet me. “What a nice surprise.” Mom and Jen, who were ringing up customers, smiled and waved at me as Fang found an out-of-the-way corner and flopped down, for all intents and purposes your ordinary, average mutt.

Knowing Lola was out of it, I did something I was so rarely able to—I hugged Rick. It felt good. Tall, blond, and handsome, he looked just like his wife and daughter . . . and nothing at all like me, since I took after my demon dad. But he was the only father I’d really known and had treated me like his own. I sighed, feeling safe and secure in his hold. It would be nice to stay here for awhile.

When I didn’t let go, he asked, “You okay, hon?”

“Fine,” I whispered. “Lola’s taking a break so I can enjoy this without worrying.” I gave him one last squeeze, then let go.

“Ah, good. Did you need something?”

“Not really. I have a few days off and thought I’d come by and see if you need any help.”

Rick glanced around. “No, we have it under control. People aren’t buying as much this year, unfortunately.”

I nodded. Even I’d heard about the economy. “So, I hear Trevor Jackson came by the store.”

Rick nodded and smiled wide. “Yeah, what a nice guy. We invited him for Christmas dinner.”

“Is that such a good idea?” I asked. “You don’t even know him.”

Rick’s smile faltered. “But you and Shade do, and we figured since he was all alone in town for the holidays . . . We invited others, too.”

That’s right—Mom and Rick enjoyed having a big crowd at Christmas. They use to invite everyone they knew who had nowhere else to go . . . and even other families. Except for the last few years when I’d developed my powers and hadn’t been able to handle them all that well around strangers.

Really, inviting others was a vote of confidence in me. I hesitated. Should I push this? I didn’t want to—I’d been trying very hard to play nice with Mom . . . so long as she was nice to me, that was.

BETTER SUCK IT UP THEN, Fang advised.

Dang. He was right. Giving Rick a smile, I said, “That’ll be fine. What time do you want us there and what do you want me to bring?”

We talked arrangements for a few minutes, then I said, “You know, there is something I’d like to ask you. Can we go to the office?”

“Sure. Let me just tell your mom.”

I gave Mom and Jen each a brief hug as Rick explained where we were going, then I followed him to the office upstairs. Fang, who was getting all kinds of attention from the customers, elected to stay downstairs.

We entered the cramped space, filled with piled boxes, stacked papers, file cabinets and packed bookcases lining the walls. It was a mess, but an organized one. Somehow, Rick knew exactly where everything was.

He leaned back in his creaky office chair as I took the bare metal chair next to the desk. “What do you need, Val? Is it money? We’re not doing that bad—”

“No, no, nothing like that. Did, uh, Trevor mention what he was looking for?”

“Yes, he said something about three old books, an encyclopedia of some sort. I haven’t seen them.”

Just as I thought. “We’re all looking.”

“What’s so important about them?”

I shrugged. “Remember the books my father gave me?” Rick knew about them—they were the only thing I’d ever had from my real father except my demon nature.

“Of course. Is that what you’re all looking for?” At my nod, he asked, “How did you lose them?”

“It’s a long story. But now they’re hidden somewhere in San Antonio and no one knows where they are.”

“Sorry, hon. If I had them, you know I’d give them to you. But I haven’t seen them.”

“I know, but I wondered if you could help me find them.”

Rick crinkled his nose like he always did when he was confused. “How can I help?”

“I’m not sure, but I keep hearing this voice in my head. I think I’m supposed to look something up, do some research to find them.”

Rick didn’t even blink at the notion that I was hearing voices. He’d been around enough demons to not question anything weird. “What do you think you need to look up?”

I thought for a moment. “I’m not sure. Uh, maybe . . . do you have any references to old books, something that might mention the encyclopedia? Or anything about keepers . . . or mage demons?” I didn’t need to tell him I was looking for real accounts, not the product of someone’s imagination.

“Maybe.” He stood and perused the books shelved above the old metal desk, then pulled down a thick one. “This one has a listing of old magick books, but I’m going to have to think about the keepers and mage demons. Have you tried the Internet?”

“Not yet.”

“Why don’t you do that, and I’ll see if I can find anything here.” He handed me the book, then snapped his fingers “Wait. Don’t I remember seeing some spells in those books?”

“Yes, in the second two volumes.”

“Then maybe it’s similar to a Book of Shadows.”

Why hadn’t I thought of that? It was how Witches recorded their spells and kept track of the rituals and other information pertinent to their craft. “Yeah, maybe it is.”

“If you don’t find anything on the Internet, you might check with one of the local Wiccans.”

“Okay” I knew from working here that most of them had a lot of desire, but very little

actual power. “Is there one you’d recommend? Maybe someone who knows a lot about this kind of stuff . . . or some real magick?”

He thought for a moment. “Marina Lester might be the one you want. She’s in the book . . . and she takes appointments as a psychic. Maybe even walk-ins. I’ve heard she’s extremely accurate, if she’s able to give you a reading.”

Wondering what that meant, I thanked him, then looked her up in the phone book. I called her, and since she had an appointment available in an hour, I wrote down her home address. Taking the book Rick had given me back downstairs, I chatted with Mom and Jen a little then asked Fang, *You ready to go?*

He scrambled to his feet. YEAH. THIS LYING AROUND STUFF GETS OLD AFTER AWHILE. WHERE ARE WE GOING?

“To see a psychic.”

OOOOKAY. WELL, IT’S DIFFERENT, ANYWAY. NEVER GET BORED AROUND YOU, BABE.

Yeah. Kind of like that old Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times.”

Marina Lester was nothing at all like I’d pictured. I should have known better than to buy in to stereotypes, but I’d expected an old crone or, at the very least, an overweight poser with heavy eye shadow and a dimly-lit space draped with acres of colorful shawls. Instead, this Witch was tiny, petite, and maybe a few years older than me. She wore everyday clothes just like mine and led me into an ordinary family room that looked a lot like Mom’s. The only thing that looked remotely witchy about her was her hair—long red ringlets bounced around the delicate features of her face as if they were springs.

She didn’t even raise an eyebrow at Fang’s presence, but offered me a seat and came right to the point, smiling and speaking in a confident tone. “This is how I work. It’s twenty dollars for a reading, but only if the spirits speak through me. I’ll need to hold your hands and concentrate. Sometimes the spirits come through, sometimes they don’t. If they do, I won’t remember it, but I’ll record what they say on tape. I can discuss it with you, but I won’t necessarily understand it, and the message is often very brief and cryptic. If they don’t come through, there’s no obligation and you don’t owe me a thing. Okay?”

Weird, that was very similar to the way Tessa operated, though Micah’s assistant had never

claimed the voices were spirits.

Duh. I should have seen it before—she looked just like Tessa, except for the hair. Without thinking, I blurted out, “You’re a soothsayer demon, aren’t you?”

WONDERED IF YOU’D PICK UP ON THAT, Fang said with a grin. SHE’S DEFINITELY SOME KIND OF DEMON—I CAN HEAR HER THOUGHTS.

Her face paled and she jumped out of her chair, her hand at her throat. “Wha-what are you saying?”

“It’s okay,” I soothed her. “I’m a demon, too. And my dog is a hellhound.”

She glanced wildly between the two of us. “You need to leave now.”

WHOA, BABE, Fang cautioned me. I’M NOT SURE SHE KNOWS WHAT SHE IS.

I worked on looking as unthreatening as possible. “I’m sorry, I guess I made an assumption. Don’t you know what you are?”

“I’m a Witch, and a psychic,” she said with an unsteady laugh. “There’s no such things as demons.”

From the nervousness in her voice, I gathered she did know what she was, but didn’t want to admit it.

OR SHE’S BEEN TOLD TO KEEP IT HIDDEN, Fang suggested.

Definitely a possibility. How could I convince her I knew what I was talking about? “It’s okay,” I said gently. “There are a lot of other demons in San Antonio. In fact, I know one who has the same gift you do.”

“That’s not possible,” she said, “Mama said we’re the only—” She broke off and covered her mouth, looking as though she regretted revealing her secret.

Fang trotted over to place a gentle paw against her calf. MAYBE YOUR MAMA DIDN’T KNOW.

She stared at him in disbelief, then at me, her eyes wide.

“I did mention he was a hellhound,” I reminded her. “That means he can telepathically connect with demons.”

She sat back down gingerly, as if she were afraid her world would shatter if she moved too fast. “I—I don’t know . . . “

“ . . . what to say?” I guessed.

She nodded, still looking stunned.

SHE CAN’T BELIEVE SHE CAN ACTUALLY TALK TO ANYONE ABOUT THIS. SHE HASN’T BEEN ABLE TO TALK TO ANYONE SINCE HER MOTHER PASSED AWAY, Fang told me privately.

“You don’t need to say anything,” I told her. “Have you heard of the Demon Underground?”

She shook her head.

I grinned at her. “Well, it’s full of people just like you and me.”

“You’re a soothsayer?”

“No, I’m a succubus, but I have a friend who’s a soothsayer. She’s in the Underground, too.”

“I don’t understand,” Marina said, looking as though she were having a hard time taking it all in. “What does the Underground do?”

“We help other demons keep their presence a secret, help them find jobs, and generally give them someone else to talk to about what it’s like being part demon in a human world. Oh, and I haven’t been in it for very long, but they seem to have lots of parties.”

She sighed. “It sounds wonderful.” She glanced back and forth between us. “You aren’t putting me on, are you?”

NOPE, Fang confirmed. IT’S ALL TRUE.

She jumped, seeming unnerved whenever Fang spoke to her. “Hold on,” I said. “Let me call Tessa and she can give you some more info.” I dialed the club and was glad when Tessa answered. “Hey, Tessa, I think I found your long-lost cousin or something.”

“My what?”

“Hold on.” I didn’t want Marina to think we were trying to scam her or anything. “I’ll hand the phone to her and you can tell her what you are.”

“Are you sure?” Tessa asked.

“Yes, I’m sure. Just trust me, okay?”

“Okay,” Tessa said.

I handed the phone to Marina and said, “Ask her what she is.”

Marina took the phone gingerly. “He-hello?”

Wanting to give her some privacy, I wandered over to look out the window as she held a conversation with Tessa.

Fang joined me. I CAN TELL YOU WHAT THEY’RE SAYING.

I know, but I prefer to give her the illusion of privacy, okay?

YOU GOT IT.

After about half an hour of me pretending to stare out the window and trying *not* to listen to their conversation, Marina finally handed me the phone and said, “Thank you. Tessa explained all about the organization and invited me for dinner at Yule. It was wonderful to talk to someone else who understands.”

“You’re welcome,” I said and took back my phone. “I remember how glad I was to find other people like me. It’s a relief.”

“Yes. I’m sorry I was so skeptical at first.”

We both sat back down. “Not a problem. I totally get it. I’m just sorry I hit you with it like that.”

She shrugged. “It worked out. So, I assume you didn’t come here to invite me to join the Underground. Do you still want a reading? It’s on the house.”

“No, actually, I wasn’t looking for a reading. I was hoping to get some information.” She looked surprised and I hurried to assure her, “I was planning on paying you for it.”

She waved that away as if it were inconsequential. “Don’t worry about that. I owe you. What do you need to know?”

“You practice Wicca?”

She nodded. “I do. I really resonate with the beliefs. Plus, it’s helped me . . . blend in to a com-

munity.”

She'd been luckier than me in that respect. “Do you have a Book of Shadows?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We're looking for some information on three books that are something like a Witch's Book of Shadows. Have you ever heard anything about the *Encyclopedia Magicka*?” I explained what I knew of it.

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. “I don't remember anything offhand. I've become a bit of a scholar on Wiccan ways, and I don't recall ever seeing anything like that mentioned.”

Rick *had* sent me to the right person. “Maybe it was called something else?”

She thought for a moment. “I don't think so . . . but I can look.”

“How about a keeper or a mage demon?”

“Not that I recall, but let me do a little research and I'll get back to you.” She looked chagrined that she couldn't help me.

“Okay,” I said, trying to mask my disappointment. “Here's my number.” I scribbled it down. “Call me if you find anything out, or if you just want someone to talk to.”

I handed her the piece of paper with my number on it and our hands brushed. As they did, Marina's eyes went flat and blank. Grabbing my wrist, she uttered a prophecy . . . the second one I'd ever received in my life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An hour later, I was home, still puzzling over the prophecy. “Seek not, lest you find more than you bargained for. Keep not, lest you are prepared to meet your destiny.”

It seemed to tell me I shouldn’t look for the books unless I was prepared to accept the consequences, and I shouldn’t keep them unless I was okay with meeting my destiny. What did that mean? Was that a veiled way of saying I’d die if I found and kept the books? Or was my “destiny” something else?

That was the problem with these soothsayer prophecies—their meaning was never clear until after the prediction came to pass. I sighed. I couldn’t be sure what it meant, so the best thing was to ignore it and continue on like I’d never heard it. I looked through the book Rick had given me. No listing for the *Encyclopedia Magicka* and nothing useful. So, I booted up Gwen’s computer in the corner of the living room and tried to figure out what the voice wanted me to look up.

I tried an Internet search for “*Encyclopedia Magicka*” first, and the only things that came up were references to role-playing games. I searched again for people trapped in books and got nothing but fiction. A search for “mage demon” brought more game stuff. And searching for a keeper of books was hopeless—scads of listings about accountants, but nothing about a keeper for magickal books.

I kept trying different combinations and different ways of saying the same thing, plus any other word combinations even close to what I was looking for, but it seemed to all be fiction, no fact. Then again, did I really expect to find factual accounts of demons on the web where anyone could see it?

Searching for “Book of Shadows” gained me a lot more information, including a mention of grimoires. Since both these types of books contained magickal spells, they were close to the *Encyclopedia Magicka*. But while reading about how to create them was interesting, I didn’t see anything that would help me find the ones that were missing. And there was nothing about mage demons writing their own grimoires.

Fang yawned, bored with the hours I’d spent searching. MAYBE THIS GAME STUFF IS A DECOY,

OR A CODE TO MAKE PEOPLE THINK IT'S ONLY FICTION.

I shrugged. Couldn't hurt to check. I pored over the rules of a bunch of games, trying to find one that fit the way the real demon world worked, but no luck. Each seemed to have inconsistencies that made me cross it off the list.

Finally, feeling eye strain—not to mention butt strain—I quit for awhile. Sheesh, this was harder than hunting the streets.

Fang stretched. I'M BEGINNING TO THINK THIS VOICE OF YOURS IS BOGUS. WHY DIDN'T IT SAY *WHAT* YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO LOOK UP?

“Because Kyle interrupted it when he messed with my dreams.”

THEN MAYBE YOU SHOULD TRY DREAMING AGAIN.

Maybe. But the voice only seemed to be able to reach me when I was doped up or unconscious . . . or hanging out in that still, private place within myself.
SO USE THE CANDLE, ALREADY.

“I will . . . but let me give my butt a break first.”

I got up and stretched, then searched for leftovers in the kitchen. With Gwen doing most of the cooking, there was always something good to eat in the fridge.

After we ate, I decided to try using the candle again. It was dark, so I set the candle on my nightstand, lit it, and turned off the lights. Sitting on the bed where it was softer on my backside, I stilled my mind as Micah had taught me and stared into the flame.

It became easier each time to go to that still, quiet place deep inside me. Without Lola to distract me, I visualized my favorite place in the world. In my mind's eye, I pictured myself sitting on the banks of the San Antonio River on the River Walk. The place was all mine, free of tourists, parties, or people of any kind. I watched as the lazy waters of the jade green river flowed by, the soft breeze caressing my skin.

Peaceful, quiet, serene . . . perfect. I stayed there for awhile, just enjoying the unaccustomed tranquility. When I felt it was time, I opened my mind and my heart to receive any messages that might be waiting for me. After a time, I heard a whisper, so faint I almost didn't catch it.

Tell me what you want me to know, I urged.

But though the voice became a little louder, I couldn't catch every word. *Must . . . me . . . before . . .*

What? I concentrated harder, hoping the voice would become more clear.

The voice tried two more times before I finally got the full message. *You must find me before Trevor Jackson does.*

So it *was* the books talking to me! *Where are you?*

In the—

The voice abruptly cut off. This time, the sudden termination wasn't me, wasn't anything I'd done. I was still in the trance. What had happened to cut our communication? I stayed by the river in my mind a while longer, open and receptive, but the voice didn't return.

Disappointed, I finally withdrew and brought myself back to awareness of the here and now. And, as I lay back on the bed, I became aware of all my aches and pains. The wound in my side was almost healed, but still ached. My head still hurt a bit from where Micah had walloped me, but the worst part was the energy conduits that Lola used and my abused chakras. They still felt seared and overly sensitive. And I was still weaker than normal, not quite back up to full slayerish capacity.

So this was what it was like to feel human . . . vulnerable . . . fragile.

I wasn't sure I liked it much.

Lola was hiding down deep somewhere, which was odd but good. I couldn't remember a time when she hadn't been ever-present, always empty, always seeking more male energy, even when she was totally satisfied. But now, it was as if she was curled around the pain of the backlash, hiding from the boogie man, afraid to come out.

And, speaking of that backlash and what had caused it, why wasn't I more upset? This wasn't natural. It wasn't like Mood was around to control my emotions. Or was she? Upset, I sat up, prepared to call Micah and demand to know what was going on.

Fang spoke from beside the bed. CHILL. IT'S NOT MOOD—IT WAS KYLE.

“The dream demon? What did he do to me?”

HE PLANTED A SUGGESTION IN YOUR DREAMS SO YOU WOULDN'T FREAK OUT ABOUT WHAT YOU DID. HE TRIGGERED IT BY PATTING YOU ON THE SHOULDER WHEN HE SAW HOW UPSET YOU WERE.

And now that I knew that, the dam broke and the emotions poured back in. “Damn it, he had no right.”

MICAH ASKED HIM TO. HE DIDN'T WANT YOU WORRYING ABOUT IT UNTIL YOU WERE ABLE TO HANDLE IT.

For some reason, that just ticked me off. “I can handle it just fine.”

NOT FUN WHEN YOU'RE ON THE RECEIVING END, IS IT?

I glared at him. “Shut up.”

IS THIS YOU HANDLING IT? 'CAUSE I GOTTA SAY, BABE, IT SURE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE IT.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Why was I letting the hellhound get to me? Maybe because the sudden flood of overflowing emotions needed some outlet? Hell, I couldn't just sit here and let them overwhelm me. I had to deal with them somehow.

Grabbing my stakes, I headed for the Valkyrie.

Where you going? Fang asked as he trotted close behind me.

“I don't know. Out.”

WELL, YOU'RE NOT GOING WITHOUT ME. SOMEONE NEEDS TO KEEP YOU GROUNDED.

“Whatever,” I muttered. At the moment, I didn't care. I just needed to deal with these emotions churning inside me. Fear . . . shame . . . anger . . . they all warred for dominance.

Fang jumped up into his sheepskin-lined seat on the back of the bike. CAN YOU HELP ME WITH THE GOGGLES? I THINK I'M GONNA NEED THEM.

Impatiently, I strapped the goggles on over his head to keep the wind out of his eyes, then swung my leg over the seat and started the bike, revving the engine. I poured all of my frustration into gunning it the hell out of there, and as soon as I got on Highway 10, I sped up until I barreled along at breakneck speed, blowing the last of the cobwebs out of my brain. I couldn't worry about the emotions. All my concentration went to controlling the bike, fighting the wind and dodging other drivers on the dark highway.

I did just fine until we came up on the town of Seguin, and Fang warned me the police would likely be patrolling near the town. His warning came just in time. As I slowed to the speed limit, I saw a cruiser parked alongside the highway.

FEEL BETTER NOW? Fang asked.

Since he wasn't snarky for a change and actually sounded like he cared, I said, "Not really."
DID YOU HAVE, YOU KNOW, AN ACTUAL REASON FOR COMING HERE?

I sighed. *No, I just wanted to clear my mind.* But it hadn't gotten us any closer to finding the books.

MAYBE YOU SHOULD TALK YOUR PROBLEMS OUT WITH SOMEONE INSTEAD OF STEWING ABOUT IT, HE SUGGESTED.

I thought about it. "Maybe." Yeah, I should talk to Micah. He'd be the most likely to understand, since he had the same kind of issues I did.

Fang nuzzled me. IT'S WORTH A SHOT. I HATE IT WHEN YOU'RE OUT OF SORTS.

I smiled. So now I was supposed to do it for the hellhound's sake? I could deal with that. I pulled off the highway to get gas and something to eat and drink, then headed back to Club Purgatory.

On the way, I tried not to dwell on the fear lurking within me, thinking instead how nice it would be to take a vacation. I preferred taking a cruise to somewhere they didn't have demons or vampires, but Fang claimed that kind of place didn't exist. Besides, dogs weren't allowed on cruises, and he deserved a vacation too. We batted some other ideas back and forth, agreeing to avoid long flights when he'd have to be caged, and opting to go somewhere we'd never been. Since that was pretty much everywhere outside of Texas, there was lots to choose from. Maybe San Francisco, Taos, or Colorado Springs. They all sounded like great places.

When we arrived at Club Purgatory, we'd finally agreed to take a long driving vacation and make a loop to wander through New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, California, and Arizona to see the sights. It sounded like fun, but now that I was at the club and off my bike, I was wrenched back into the everyday world. Taking off Fang's goggles, I said wistfully, "Maybe someday."

Fang nuzzled against me for a moment. LET'S PLAN ON IT . . . ONCE YOU'VE MET ALL YOUR OBLIGATIONS.

Yes, that was the problem, wasn't it? My obligations. Sheesh, I was only eighteen. I wasn't *supposed* to have this many obligations. Not only was I contracted to the Movement until the books were found and the vamps came out, but the demons seemed to want to use me as a sort of enforcer, the Special Crimes Unit still wanted me to train vampire hunters, and my parents thought I

should set a good example for my half sister. Would it never end?

Fang jumped down off the bike. HEY, THAT'S WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A GROWN-UP.

Even grown-ups get vacations, I reminded him, feeling sulky.

THEN LET'S FIND THE BOOKS AND HELP THE MOVEMENT COME OUT TO THE WORLD SO WE CAN TAKE ONE.

Good plan. But first, I needed to talk to Micah. I went in through the back and headed through the fake flames and hell theme of the club to his office, feeling the deep, thrumming beat of the music in the club. I'd never really been drawn to that scene, maybe because none of my friends were. But the clubbers all seemed to be having fun . . . I envied them for that.

Micah's office door was open, so I went in. He was working on some kind of paperwork. The simplicity of his office was a nice contrast to the drama of the club.

"Hi," he said. "Come to visit?"

I shrugged. "Just kind of need someone to talk to. Do you have time?"

"Of course," he said, and came around the desk to close the door, then sat in one of the side chairs. "What do you want to talk about?"

"I just realized Kyle made me . . . stop feeling things."

Micah grimaced. "I'm sorry. I knew you'd be upset, but I figured it was for the best at the time. Fang said you'd blame yourself for losing control."

I glanced down at Fang, but he gave a sort of doggie shrug and laid down with his head on his paws. Oh well, it didn't matter. I was all over my mad, and I knew they were just trying to help. "Who else is there to blame?"

"Blame for what?" Micah asked softly. "You saved a lot of lives that night . . . vampires and demons alike."

"I lost control, Micah. I *enjoyed* it. If you hadn't stopped me, I would have killed all the men there."

"But I did stop you."

"What if you hadn't been there?"

Micah shook his head. “You don’t get it yet, do you?”

“Get what?” What was there to get?

“That’s what the Demon Underground is *for*. Sure, we help each other find jobs and provide others to socialize with like ourselves, but we’re here primarily to help each other deal with our gifts.” He could obviously tell I was puzzled, so he added, “You’re not alone, Val. There’s not one of us here who hasn’t been tempted to use our powers in a way others would find unacceptable. We help each other to be strong, to get beyond that temptation, to be better people.”

“I—I didn’t realize.”

“What it means is that you don’t have to go it alone, that we’re here to back you up . . . just as you back us up.”

Sheesh, and here I’d been whining about my obligations to the Underground. Made me feel kind of stupid.

YOU’RE TOO HARD ON YOURSELF, Fang said. LISTEN TO MICAH.

“I get what you’re saying,” I told Micah. “But that doesn’t change the fact that if you hadn’t been there, I would’ve killed a lot of people.”

“I doubt it. If I hadn’t been there to control the women, they would have stopped you. Or Fang would have found a way.”

YEAH, Fang said. IF ROSA HAD CAUGHT YOU ABOUT TO DRAIN ALEJANDRO DRY, I DON’T THINK SHE WOULD HAVE BEEN AS GENTLE AS MICAH IN STOPPING YOU.

I hadn’t even thought about that. For some perverse reason, that made me feel better. Fang was right—Rosa and the other women would definitely have kept me from taking everything. Grimacing, I said, “I guess I owe you one, cuz.”

He grinned. “I don’t think so. After all, you saved my life and have helped the Underground in many other ways. I probably still owe *you*.”

I waved that away. I wasn’t interested in keeping score. It was enough to know we’d be there for each other.

And what he said was beginning to sink in. It wasn’t all one way—I didn’t have to be the savior

all the time. Wow, I'd never really had anyone who'd be there for me like that. And, I now realized, any of the other demons would have probably done the same thing for me that Micah had. Kind of like a family. For the first time since I joined the Underground, I actually felt like I belonged somewhere. Nice.

But that didn't change certain other facts. "I appreciate that, really I do, but what happens now that I've let the genie completely out of the bottle? Can I ever stuff her back in?"

Micah gave me a half smile. "I think you can do anything you set your mind to."

I shook my head impatiently. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I don't need that rah-rah stuff. I need to know if I can trust myself to ever use my powers again."

"It's not 'rah-rah stuff' as you call it. It's the honest truth." Micah leaned forward, his expression earnest. "Val, you are one of the strongest people I know—"

"That's not important—"

"I'm not talking bodily strength, but strength of conviction, strength of purpose, strength of character."

Whoa. Was he really talking about me?

HE IS, Fang confirmed. NOW SHUT UP AND LISTEN.

"You kept your succubus side suppressed for a very long time, longer than I thought possible. You were getting a handle on it with Shade's help. You did it once—you can do it again."

I shook my head. "But what if I can't control it? What if I . . . suck him dry?"

"You won't."

"How do you know that?" I wanted to believe him, but the evidence didn't support it.

"Succubi and incubi were designed to enthrall one person at a time. I had a very hard time controlling the small number I held, and you had what? Four times that? And you didn't lose control until you tried to take on too many."

"Maybe."

"Think about it this way. You've been out and about all day. Have you had the urge to consume

anyone yet?”

“No,” I admitted, “But my succubus circuits are fried—I couldn’t even enthrall a horny teenager right now. But when they’re healed . . . “

“Then now is a good time to work on getting control, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” I said doubtfully.

“I *know* it is.” He leaned back in his chair. “Val, what choice do you have? You either need to learn to control it, or it will control you. And I’m betting on you.”

I shook my head, not entirely convinced.

Looking exasperated, Micah said, “This time, try something radically different. Something way out of character for you.”

“Like what?”

“Like asking for help.”

“I asked for help with rescuing Josh and Andrew,” I protested.

“Yes, but that was for other people. You don’t ask for assistance when you need it, personally.”

Whoa. Was I really like that? Did I really try to do everything myself without asking for help?

PRETTY MUCH.

Well, crap. He wasn’t the first one who’d said that, either. Maybe Micah was right. Maybe if I had help with this, I could figure out how to *not* lose control of Lola ever again.

Micah continued, “People like to help others. They’d love to help you if you ask for it. They just don’t know what you need.”

I nodded. “Okay, I’ll think about it.” I rose to give him a hug. “Thanks for pounding some sense into my head.”

“No problem.” He grinned. “Next time, I’ll try not to be so literal.”

I laughed, and a knock sounded on the door.

IT’S TESSA, Fang said. SHE’S BEEN WANTING TO COME IN, BUT I ASKED HER TO WAIT UNTIL YOU WERE DONE.

“Come in,” Micah called.

Micah’s assistant opened the door and smiled at me. “I’m glad you’re here. I finally got the call back from the Los Angeles Underground.”

“Good,” Micah said. “And . . . ?”

“They never heard of Trevor Jackson.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The LA Underground had never heard of Trevor? Didn't surprise me at all. "Ha, I knew it."

"Knew what?" Micah asked.

"Knew he was lying about being a member of the Underground," I said triumphantly.

Tessa shook her head. "Actually, he never said he was a member of the Underground. But since he knew of their existence and ours, I just assumed he was. But he's not in any of their records."

Back to square one. "But doesn't it seem odd that they don't know anything about him?"

"Maybe," Micah said, then asked Tessa, "Did they give you any other information?"

She nodded. "I asked about mage demons, keepers and the encyclopedia. My contact said the LA Underground is well aware of mage demons, and the word is, when encountering one, to shoot first and ask questions later." Tessa gave Micah, Mr. Dudley Do Right, an apologetic look. "Apparently, a mage demon caused the 1906 San Francisco earthquake that took over three thousand lives and left three-quarters of the population homeless. The Underground there has never forgotten it."

Micah shook his head, whether in disbelief, denial, or disgust, I wasn't sure.

"And keepers? What about them?" I asked.

"She wasn't so sure of that part, but their history says that's when the Underground got together to find a way to control the mage demon. Keepers came into being about the same time, so are probably related. She doesn't remember hearing anything about the books, but knows their predecessors did something to control the mage." Tessa shrugged. "I figured it was the keeper. She admits she isn't the most knowledgeable person there, but said she'd see what she can find out and call us back."

"That wasn't real helpful," I said. I'd hoped to find some kind of evidence that would prove who Trevor really was.

“More than you think,” Micah said. “Now we know mage demons do exist, and keepers were probably developed to control them. Maybe we’ll learn more after the holidays.”

“That’s too late,” I protested. “We need to find those books now.”

“I’m glad you agree,” someone said from the doorway.

I turned around. Trevor and Shade stood there. How much had they heard?

NOT MUCH, Fang said. THEY JUST GOT HERE.

Gee, thanks for the warning.

He shrugged. WASN’T NECESSARY.

“But what brought you to that conclusion?” Trevor continued.

Taking the offensive, I said, “We just learned the LA Underground doesn’t have you in their records.”

“Of course not.”

Trevor looked so calm about my dramatic revelation, it really took me aback. I’d kind of hoped he’d come up with a lame excuse that would prove he was trying to deceive us. “What do you mean, of course not?” I tried not to sound too challenging, since Shade was standing there, looking all enigmatic and swirly. Sure wished I could see his expression about now.

Trevor shrugged. “I never joined.”

“Why not?” I asked. After all, he’d been a real social butterfly in our Underground.

“Things are different in LA. They’re more focused on other things.”

“Like what?” Micah asked. “I’ve never really talked to the Undergrounds in other cities much.”

Micah gestured us all to take a seat, so I grabbed one on the couch next to Shade while Micah and Trevor took the armchairs. Tessa perched on the arm of Micah’s chair.

Trevor settled in, looking very comfortable. “The LA Underground seems to be more concerned with finding jobs in the entertainment industry, making sure their people are able to pass as human. I’ve never had a problem passing, so I didn’t see any point in joining.”

After what Micah had just told me, I bet there was more to it than that.

Trevor wrinkled his nose. “We had nothing in common, so I didn’t socialize with them either.”

Yeah, right. The metrosexual hairdresser was soooo not the Hollywood type.

Was Micah buying this? I couldn’t tell.

HE’S RESERVING JUDGMENT, Fang said. GIVING THE GUY THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT.

Shade touched my arm and I glanced at him. He was giving me a warning look. Okay, so maybe I should pretend to believe Trevor, too, and wait for him to slip up.

“They did confirm that letting mage demons have control of the books is a bad idea,” I conceded.

Trevor gave me a half smile. “You didn’t believe me? Or Shade? He said the same thing I did.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was just trying to show you that I agreed with you.” When he gave me a knowing smile, I said screw it. This wasn’t me and no one would believe it. “You know, if you gave us something we could use, I might be less skeptical. Like that shield you have. It would come in real handy for some of our folks.”

Everyone turned to look at Trevor and he grimaced. “I wish I could help you, but it’s not something external that anyone can use. It’s something internal, peculiar to me and my needs.”

“Oh? What are those needs? What kind of demon are you, anyway?”

“Val, really,” Micah protested.

Okay, yeah, I knew that was supposed to be the height of rudeness in the Underground community, but how could I find out if I didn’t ask?

Trevor’s smile disappeared. “I prefer to keep that private. It’s necessary to protect myself.”

“I thought so,” Shade said.

Huh?

My guy smiled. “I’ve figured it out. There’s only one type of demon I’ve read about who needs to keep up a constant shield like that. Add that to your ability to sense magick, and I know what you are.”

Trevor looked apprehensive, but silently, I urged Shade to tell all.

Shade's grin widened. "You're an empath demon, aren't you?"

Some emotion flickered across Trevor's face, but it was gone so fast, I didn't know what it was. He gave Shade a rueful grin. "You figured it out."

Micah and Tessa looked enlightened, but I still didn't have a clue. "What's an empath demon?"

"Sort of the opposite of Mood," Shade explained. "They can sense the emotions of everyone around them to know what they're feeling, but can't influence them. If he didn't have his shield to keep the emotions out, he'd probably go crazy." Shade looked at him with compassion. "Are you ever able to use your gifts?"

"Only as a keeper," Trevor said. "My ability to sense when the books are getting dangerous is invaluable."

"But if you can't influence emotions, how can you control the books?" I asked.

"An empath has other abilities as well, plus the training I received as a keeper gave me the control I need." Trevor raised an eyebrow. "It doesn't take an empath to see that you don't believe me. What have I done to merit your suspicion?"

"Act suspiciously," I shot back. "Keep secrets, let us believe things that aren't true, like your membership in the Underground."

"I've explained all that," Trevor said mildly, apparently refusing to let me bait him. "But I think I know why you're so suspicious when it's so unwarranted."

Unwarranted? Ha! "Oh yeah, why?"

"I think it's your prolonged exposure to the books."

"What do you mean?" Shade asked, looking interested and not at all like he didn't believe the creep.

Addressing me, Trevor asked, "How long did you have the books? About thirteen years?"

I nodded warily, not sure where he was going with this.

"How do you know they haven't influenced you against me?"

"That's ridiculous."

“Is it? They knew a keeper would come for them eventually. What would keep them from influencing a young, susceptible mind? Make that young mind believe that keepers are bad and shouldn’t be trusted?”

Dang. He made it sound so plausible. “I think I’d know if that happened.”

“Would you? Would you really?”

This guy was beginning to get on my nerves.

“Andrew didn’t remember where the books told him to hide them,” Shade reminded me.

“But he did remember that the books told him what to do.”

Trevor shrugged. “The books didn’t have as much time to work on him as they did on you.” He cocked his head and gave me an insincere smile of concern. “I wonder why they programmed you that way. And what other things did they plant in your impressionable mind?”

Damn, he was good. He almost had me wondering. And from everyone else’s speculative expressions, he was well on his way to convincing them, too.

ASSWIPE, Fang said with a growl. HE’S TRYING TO TURN THEM AGAINST YOU, MAKE THEM QUESTION YOU.

Yeah, I got that. “Don’t be ridiculous,” I all but spat out. “Remember who’s in those books? Your *father*. Why would he hide from you?”

“He wouldn’t. He’s not in control—the books are. Maybe they’re asserting undue influence over you even now.”

“Oh yeah? Then why is it so hard for them to reach me? Why can I only hear them speak when I’m damn near unconscious?”

I was gratified by the stunned look on his face until he said, “What? They *talk* to you?”

Oops.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“What do you mean, they talk to you?” Micah asked, indignantly echoing Trevor.

Crap. I really wished I hadn’t let that slip. Wonder if I could pretend like I was joking and laugh it off.

NO WAY, Fang said. YOU’RE NOT EXACTLY KNOWN FOR BEING A CUT-UP. BETTER TELL ’EM THE TRUTH.

Okay . . . some of it anyway. I shrugged like it was no big deal. “Something or someone is trying to reach me. I thought it might be the books.”

Trevor’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure?”

“No, I’m not. That’s why I didn’t say anything.” That, and the fact the books wanted me to find them before *he* did.

“How did this happen?” Micah asked.

I sighed. “Look, it only happened when I was unconscious or deep in a trance. It’s like that’s the only time the voice could reach me.”

Shade linked his fingers with mine, his frown becoming visible. “That doesn’t sound good. What did the voice say? Is it trying to control you?”

“No, the only thing he’s said so far is to find him, and that we’re looking in the wrong place.”

“He?” Micah said.

“Well, it sounds like a man’s voice. Do you think it might be your father?” I asked, trying to deflect the attention back on to Trevor.

“Perhaps,” he said, but from his suspicious expression, I could see he doubted it. “So where did the voice say we *should* look?”

“I don’t know. Every time it tries to tell me something, we get cut off or interrupted, like we have a bad connection. Really, I don’t know anything or I would’ve found them by now.” *Lay off, dude.*

Trevor relaxed then, and I wondered what I’d said that had caused that reaction.

“Can you tell where the voice is coming from?” Micah asked.

“No. I hear it in my head.”

Trevor glanced at Shade with an I-told-you-so look which ticked me off more.

“No, it’s not all just in my head,” I snapped at him. “I heard what I heard.”

Shade still frowned, and Micah glanced back and forth between Trevor and me uncertainly. “Fang, can you add anything?”

NO, SORRY. He gave me an apologetic look. I WASN’T CONNECTED IN WHEN SHE HEARD THE VOICE.

I hated the way that sounded. Damn it, I wasn’t hearing voices. Well, okay, I was, but it wasn’t just my imagination . . . was it?

“Maybe the blows to your head . . .” Trevor said suggestively.

“Nope. The voice tried to contact me *before* Micah hit me.” Sheesh, I hated how defensive I sounded.

“Of course you’d believe that now.” Trevor’s expression held a fake look of concern that might fool everyone else, but it didn’t fool me.

Why was he trying to discredit me? Come to think of it, why wasn’t he pressing me harder to help him find the books with the voice’s help? Did he really believe I was crazy? Or faking it? Once again, I really wished Fang could read the guy’s mind.

Fed up, I said, “You know what? Never mind. Forget I said anything. If you want to believe I’m delusional, I’m cool with that. I’ll just find the books before you do.”

Shade gave me a one-armed hug. Normally, I’d love that, but right now I’m sure I felt stiff as a stake in his hold. “Val, no one believes—”

“Let’s drop it, okay?” I said. “So, why did you two come here? Did you have an appointment with Micah?”

Most of them looked like they wanted to say something else to me, but they let me change the subject.

Shade squeezed me. “I was worried about you. I asked Micah and Tessa to let me know if you blamed yourself for what happened. I wanted to make sure you’re all right.”

“It’s okay,” I said. I wondered how to explain that Micah had talked me down from the ledge, so to speak, and I was feeling much better.

P’LL LET SHADE KNOW, Fang said.

Thanks.

Shade squeezed my arm a little. He’d gotten better at not reacting to Fang’s mental invasions. He probably had a lot of practice with Princess.

“How are you feeling?” Shade murmured, as if it was only the two of us in the room.

“Almost healed, but a little tired,” I admitted. I still wasn’t back up to a hundred percent.

“Then why don’t you let me take you home?”

I thought about denying I needed help, but getting Shade away from Trevor’s influence held a lot of appeal . . . and besides, it was past ten and I had nothing else planned for the rest of the night. “Okay,” I said softly.

GOOD CHOICE, Fang said. LET HIM BE THE STRONG ONE FOR A CHANGE.

Yeah, I guess guys liked that sort of thing. And I had to admit, it was nice to have someone who actually wanted to take care of me.

No one objected, so we left on the Valkyrie. It was a tight fit with Shade driving and me squished between him and Fang’s seat, but very cozy. I snuggled my arms around him, laid my head on his back and enjoyed the ride home. It was really nice to have an excuse to hold onto Shade, especially with Lola out of commission. Made me feel like a normal girl on a normal date with her boyfriend. Even Fang was quiet for a change. Closing my eyes, I enjoyed the sensation of being warmed against Shade’s body, feeling safe and cared for.

When we arrived at the townhouse, I didn’t want this lovely, serene feeling to end, so I invited him inside, into the bedroom. Fang headed outside as I ditched my jeans and got under the covers, patting the space beside me invitingly.

Shade hesitated. “I’m not sure this is such a good idea.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “I just want to cuddle for awhile, no Lola involved.” When he hesitated, I added, “I feel better just being around you.”

“All right, then.” Toeing off his shoes, Shade started to join me on the bed.

“Wait—don’t you want to take off your jeans? Get comfy?” Yes, I was pushing the limits a bit, but I’d been living most of my life on the edge lately.

He paused for a moment, then shucked his jeans and joined me under the covers.

I snuggled up to him, laying my head on his chest and throwing my bare leg over his. Oh wow, this was great. Sighing, I closed my eyes and let the feelings roll over me. He made me feel . . . I couldn’t even describe it. So good. Like my bones were melting and fizzy water ran through my veins. And warm, really warm. Though I felt a much milder version of the slamming need that Lola forced me to feel, it was so much better. It felt . . . real, genuine. Truly me.

Shade squeezed me tight. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” he whispered.

“Feels pretty good to me,” I whispered back.

He chuckled softly. “That’s the problem. It feels too good.” He released me.

“Is that such a bad thing?” I asked wistfully.

“I’m sure it won’t be,” Shade murmured. “But I don’t want you to do something on the spur of the moment that might affect you for the rest of your life.”

“But—”

“No, I want you to be sure. This is something you won’t be able to take back.”

Dang. “Why are you so darned sensible?”

He laughed. “Someone has to be. And if it weren’t for the fact we need you as you are right now, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“Really?” I asked, trying not to sound pitiful and needy.

He kissed me on the nose. “Absolutely. You can tell I want you. I’ve always wanted you.”

He turned me over so we could spoon. I don’t know if he thought it would help or not, but it left me with a heightened awareness of him. But the guy was a gentleman, darn it, and did nothing but smooth my hair back, then lay his arm across my waist.

“So,” Shade said, “did Micah really help you understand that no one blames you for what almost happened?”

I guess it was time to talk. Holding back a sigh, I said, “Yeah. Actually, he helped me to see that someone would have had my back, no matter what.”

“Good. Because it’s true, you know. Any one of us would have helped.”

“Even Trevor?”

“Of course. He respects you. He’s mentioned it several times.”

To Shade, maybe. But in my world, actions spoke louder than weaselly words. But I had to know . . . “Why do you like him so much, Shade? Maybe if I could see what you see in him, I might think differently.” Well, not really, but I did want to know the appeal.

I felt him shrug. “I don’t know—he’s a friend. I just like the guy. He understands me, what it’s like to be a shadow demon. He knows a lot about other things, too.”

“Like what?”

“Guy things.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what that meant. “Really? He owns hair salons, for heaven’s sake.”

“That doesn’t make him any less a man. He’s not gay, you know.”

No, he didn’t seem to discriminate at all between the sexes. “But he’s not exactly contributing to society in a meaningful way, now is he?”

“He’s not a slayer, you mean?” Shade asked, an edge to his voice.

“No, that’s not—”

“He contributes in other ways. He’s a keeper, remember?”

Maybe. I wasn’t entirely convinced of that, either.

“What do you have against him, Val?”

I thought for a moment, trying to find a way to sugar-coat it, but nothing came. “I guess I just don’t trust him. There are too many unanswered questions. Too many secrets.”

“Maybe he has just as much reason as I do to keep some things quiet. I prefer to let him keep his privacy.” When I didn’t say anything for a moment, Shade added, “Are you worried that I’m spending too much time with him? That he’s taking your place?”

The jealousy thing again? “No—”

“Because if you are, don’t worry. If it ever comes down to a choice between him and you, there’s no question. It’s you, Val. It’s always been you.”

Feeling suddenly overwhelmed, “Oh” was all I could say.

He squeezed me lightly. “I’ve been waiting for the right moment to tell you this, a time when you knew I wasn’t under Lola’s influence.” I heard him take a deep breath. “I love you, you know.”

I inhaled sharply, then couldn’t breathe for a moment. Oh, wow. I didn’t know why people did drugs—this was the biggest high I could imagine. I turned to face him. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” He kissed me softly on the lips. “Don’t worry, you don’t have to say it back.”

“But I do. I-I think I love you, too.”

“You think?” he teased.

Thank goodness he was amused, not offended. “Well, I’ve never been in love before, so I’m not sure. Is it love when you see someone and you feel all mushy inside . . . sometimes sick to your stomach or like you’re really dizzy?”

“I think so. I feel that way, too.”

I ran my hand under his shirt, feeling that need rising again. “Then you know what the logical next step is, don’t you?”

“Going steady?”

Startled, I glanced up at him to see laughter in his gorgeous blue eyes. I hit him. “No, you know what I meant.”

“Yes, I know. And I’d like nothing better, you know that. But I can wait. Forever . . . if it’s for you.”

Maybe he could, but I wasn’t so sure about me

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I woke feeling chilled, then smiled, remembering how nice it had felt to sleep spooned in Shade's arms. But when I groped to recover his warmth, I realized I was alone in the bed. The yummy aroma of frying bacon clued me in, and I realized Gwen must be cooking breakfast. Shade was probably in the kitchen with her.

YOU'RE HALF RIGHT, Fang said, speaking from another part of the townhouse. BUT IT'S SHADE DOING THE COOKING. GWEN ISN'T HOME YET. COME JOIN US, SLEEPYHEAD. IT'S ALMOST NOON.

WHY? Princess asked petulantly. SHE DOESN'T DESERVE IT. SHE KEPT MY HUMAN HERE *ALL NIGHT* AND LEFT ME *ALONE*.

NOT INTENTIONALLY, Fang soothed her. BESIDES, HE GOT UP EARLY TO GO GET YOU, DIDN'T HE?

YES, she grumped. BUT HE SHOULD HAVE DONE IT LAST NIGHT. HE FORGOT ALL ABOUT ME.

That last part sounded so forlorn, I almost felt sorry for the self-involved hellhound. But not quite. Shade indulged her too much. It was good for her to put someone else before herself for a change. Character-building, as Rick would say.

YOU'RE NOT HELPING, Fang reminded on a private channel. SHE CAN HEAR YOU, YOU KNOW.

Oops. I kept forgetting they could narrow their thoughts down to one person, but that I couldn't unless I concentrated really hard. Princess was as good as Fang at mind-reading and wasn't shy about using her abilities.

WHY WOULD I BE? the spaniel asked, sounding clueless.

No reason. Other than good manners, but I tried to keep that thought where she couldn't read it. *I'll take a shower then join you,* I told Fang.

Stretching, I realized that I felt a whole lot better this morning. Probably the fast healing that came with being a virgin succubus, but I wouldn't discount Shade's presence in my bed either . . . or

the fact he'd said he loved me. As I headed for the shower, I couldn't stop grinning. Shade loved *me*, warts and all. Made me feel all warm and gooey inside.

When I finally looked presentable, I joined them in the kitchen and found Shade flipping an omelet at the stove with the two hellhounds watching his every move. There was no feeling awkward about whether or not to kiss him this time. Sure of my welcome, I slipped my arms around him from behind and hugged him, resting my head on his back. Love swelled within me, making me feel so full of happiness my body could barely hold it all. Wow—what a great feeling.

Shade turned in my embrace and gave me a kiss, looking all droopy-eyed and sexy.

“What a great way to wake up,” I murmured. “I could get used to this.”

He gave me a lopsided grin then turned back to the omelet. “Well, I'm not as good a cook as Gwen, but I do know how to make an omelet.”

That wasn't what I meant, but I didn't want to chase him away by going all girly mushy on him. “Smells great,” I said as my stomach growled.

He slid it onto a plate and nodded toward the table which was laden with toast, bacon, orange juice, and lots of condiments. “Sit,” he said with a smile. “Eat.”

Looked like my timing was excellent. Shade joined me at the table where three other omelets waited. He added bacon to two of the plates then slid them down to the hellhounds. I took a bite of my omelet. “Mmm. This is good.” Delicious, in fact. I didn't know if it really was that great, or if it just tasted that way because all of my senses seemed to be bathed in a sort of love-stricken glow. It could have tasted like crap, and I probably would have still loved it, simply because Shade had made it for me.

GAG ME, Fang said from beneath the table. WHERE IS VAL SHAPIRO AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HER BODY?

Making a pig of himself didn't hinder the mental communication one iota. I nudged him with my foot. *Quiet, beast. Don't make me remind you how sappy you get when talking about Princess.*

HE GETS SAPPY WHEN HE TALKS ABOUT ME? Princess asked, sounding self-satisfied and smug.

VAL, Fang whined. DIDJA HAVE TO?

Payback's a bitch, isn't it? Come to think of it, so was Princess.

Shade chuckled. Obviously, the hellhounds had shared their thoughts with both of us.

OKAY, OKAY. I'LL STOP IF YOU WILL.

Deal. I smiled at Shade. "So, what are you planning to do today?"

He shrugged. "Continue searching for the books with Trevor. The sooner we find them, the sooner we can get you out of your contract with the Movement."

I paused in mid-bite. Was that why he was so gung-ho about finding the books? That put a whole new light on things. "I appreciate you doing that, but doesn't it get boring, driving around all day while someone else listens for the books?"

"Not really. Trevor rented a comfortable car. Plus he has a lot of knowledge about other demons that he learned from his mentor and he's sharing it with me. I've been taking notes."

"Notes? Why?"

"To supplement the encyclopedia when we get it back."

"What a great idea. You could make it a living document—the encyclopedia part, I mean."

There were gaps in the entries—serious ones—and having Shade fill them in would be awesome. But could we trust Trevor's information?

SHE THINKS TREVOR IS LYING TO YOU, Princess announced.

What the heck? I glared down at the spaniel. "I did not think that," I said aloud. *You're being petty, Princess. Not exactly royal behavior, is it?*

The dog sniffed and turned her head away, giving a great imitation of a spoiled brat.

"Why don't you two go outside for a while so we can talk privately?" Shade said. "We'll call you when we're ready to leave."

Since her human had suggested it, Princess was all for it. Their plates licked clean, the hell-

hounds wandered out the doggie door.

“Really,” I assured Shade. “I didn’t think that.” And maybe my radar was wrong. Maybe Trevor was a good guy. But I was still cautious enough to keep to myself the fact that the encyclopedia didn’t want Trevor to find it first.

Shade chuckled. “No worries. I plan to double-check all the information he gives me anyway. Details might have gotten garbled after they were passed from one person to another.” Now that we were both finished eating, he reached for my hand. “What about you? Did the books talk to you again last night?”

I searched my mind, trying to remember what I’d dreamt. “Nope. Those dreams are usually pretty vivid, so I think I’d remember. The only thing I know I dreamed is that vamps and demons were searching everywhere for them, but it was a pure human who found them.”

“Maybe your subconscious is trying to tell you something. Who was it?”

“Dan.” I said it casually, hoping Shade wouldn’t make a big deal out of the fact that I’d dreamed of my ex.

Shade nodded thoughtfully. “That’s a good idea.”

“What?” There was an idea in there somewhere?

“He’s a good detective. Maybe he can, you know, detect or something to help you find them.”

Shade didn’t seem at all jealous. I didn’t know if I should feel happy that he was so evolved, or upset that he wasn’t the possessive type. Then I remembered he’d been jealous of Trevor at first, until he met the flirt. Maybe Shade was so confident of me because I’d admitted I loved him.

Yeah, I liked that answer. I was going with it.

“Dan might be able to help,” I agreed slowly. “But I wouldn’t know how to ask him. And, to tell you the truth, it would feel weird to beg a favor of him.”

“Remember, as Micah said, people like to help. You ask so seldom, it’ll be a novelty. Besides, he owes the Underground a huge favor after I healed him. Let him know this is how he can pay us

back.”

For some reason, that appealed to me, though I wasn't at all sure how Dan could help. “Okay, I'll do that. Thanks.”

While Shade called Trevor to come pick him up, I did the dishes, then called Dan. He was at home, so after Shade and Princess left with Trevor, Fang and I walked over to see my ex-partner—and ex-boyfriend. Since he lived in the same complex, it was very convenient.

Dan opened the door and invited us in. Though the layout was a mirror image of our townhouse, his was decorated in Early Bachelor with a touch of College Dorm. He had the bare necessities as far as furniture went—dark, functional and comfortable, though not exactly stylish. But he'd spared no expense on the electronic equipment, which dominated the living room against one wall.

I suddenly felt weird. The last time I'd been here, we were kind of dating. I stood like a lump in the living room and wondered where to look, what to do.

AWKWARD MUCH? Fang quipped.

No kidding. I'd been sheltered all my life from the normal things people do. I probably ought to know how to act around an ex-boyfriend in the living room where we'd once made out, but I felt clueless.

“Have a seat,” Dan said, and plopped down on the couch like nothing had ever happened.

Hmm, maybe in his view nothing had. It had been brief, though intense. I sat in the chair and relaxed. Okay, if that's how he wanted to play it, I would do the same.

When Dan looked at me expectantly, I figured I should make with the small talk first, so I said, “How's it going with you?”

“Good. The job keeps me busy.”

“And Nicole?” I hadn't intended to ask about his new girlfriend, but it just sort of blurted out of my mouth.

SMOOTH, REAL SMOOTH, Fang said.

Leave me alone. I'm doing the best I can.

“She’s doing better. Still not a hundred percent, but she’s healing nicely.”

“Good, good,” I said, grateful that he’d mistaken my nosiness about their relationship for concern about her health. After all, a vamp had stabbed her in the shoulder with a chair. “She still in the Special Crimes Unit?” After her experience, I wouldn’t blame her if she decided to have nothing to do with hunting vamps.

“Yeah. She’s taken a desk job in the SCU until the shoulder heals, then we’ll finish her training and assign her to a team.”

I sat there, trying to think of something to say. Once again, my mouth opened and words came out that I hadn’t really intended to say. “Shade and I are together now.”

I cringed immediately. How lame was that?

VERY, Fang said with a snort.

Ignoring the hellhound, I added quickly, “Thanks for your advice there.”

Dan nodded. “I’m glad it worked out for you.” He paused, then said awkwardly, “I’m seeing Nic now.”

“I figured.” Oh, great. Now he’d think I was fishing for information. Okay, I was, but I didn’t want *him* to know that.

Fang rolled his eyes. HUMANS MAKE EVERYTHING SO COMPLICATED. IF YOU WANT TO KNOW, ASK!

Like it's that easy.

IT IS.

The strange thing was, I didn’t even know why I wanted to know who Dan was seeing. I just did. But learning the nitty gritty details . . . not so much. How could I change the subject?

Luckily, Dan did it for me. “I hear you’re working with Alejandro.” He sounded disapproving.

I nodded. “I promised to work for him if any member of the Underground hurt any of his peo-

ple. And since Andrew and Josh screwed up . . . “I shrugged. “Micah’s lawyer helped me work out a contract so I only have to work with him until the encyclopedia is found and they have their coming out party.”

“Any closer to finding the books?”

“No, actually, that’s why I’m here. I was hoping you could help me.”

Dan’s eyebrows rose. “Me? How can I help?”

“As Shade reminded me, you’re a darned good detective.” I wasn’t going to mention the dream. Didn’t want him to think I was still pining over him or even thinking about him, because I wasn’t. I had Shade now.

“What have you done so far?”

I explained about Trevor and how we’d been looking for the books with his senses and mine, plus the Internet searches I’d done.

Dan grilled me on everything I knew about the books, then nodded thoughtfully.

“Can you help me?” I asked when the silence stretched on too long.

“Maybe. Where were they last seen?”

“At Mood’s house. Andrew hid them somewhere between the time he left Mood’s and before he arrived at Alejandro’s mansion.”

“How did he leave there? On foot? By car? In a cab?”

“I don’t know.” And if it was in a cab, they might have records . . .

SORRY, BABE, Fang said. ANDREW HAS AN OLD BEATER CAR AND USED IT THAT DAY. I SAW IT IN HIS MEMORIES.

“Fang says he left in his own car.” Something aligned just right in the old gray matter and an idea struck me. “Hey, you think it might show up on traffic cameras?” I asked eagerly.

My ex-partner smiled. “Maybe. Good idea. What kind of car does he drive?”

A 1967 BLACK MUSTANG, HELD TOGETHER WITH BONDO.

I passed the info on to Dan, then asked Fang, “How do you even know that?”

Fang laid his head on his paws and shrugged. ANDREW THINKS ABOUT IT A LOT. ABOUT HOW MUCH IT COST TO BUY IT, ABOUT HOW MUCH IT COSTS TO FIX IT, HOW MUCH IT’LL COST TO BUY A HUMMER NEXT—

I get the idea. Turning to Dan, I said, “I can probably get a picture of it pretty easily. You think we could find it on the traffic camera tapes?”

“Maybe. Since you know the day and about when he arrived at Alejandro’s, we can start from there and work our way back.”

“Great!” Now we were finally getting somewhere.

Shaking his head, Dan said, “It still won’t be easy. There are a lot of cameras and many routes he could have taken.”

Feeling more optimistic now that there was a chance of finding the books, I said, “No problem. I don’t mind looking. Can you set it up for me?” It would help me feel like I was actually doing something, making some kind of progress.

He pursed his lips. “I’m not sure. The guys in Traffic are kind of territorial, and they don’t like the SCU much. And you’re more of a civilian now—I don’t know if they’d allow you to look at all.”

“You think Lt. Ramirez might grease the wheels a bit? Especially if we explain why?”

“I don’t know. If it’s for the Movement, I’m not sure how well that will go over. And even if we get them to agree to release the tapes, I’d probably have to be the one to review them.”

“But it’s for the Underground, too, and you owe Micah a big favor” I hadn’t wanted to play that card unless I had to, but it was looking that way.

Dan rubbed the shoulder Shade had healed for him. Sighing, he said, “Okay, I’ll see what I can do and let you know.”

WHADDAYA KNOW? Fang snarked. THE GUY ACTUALLY CAME THROUGH FOR US.

I knew he would. After all, he still had that hero complex and couldn’t resist a damsel—or any-

one else—in distress. He only needed to be talked into it. “Thanks, Dan. I really appreciate it. I’ll get pictures of the car for you and Andrew’s license plate number.”

I was asking a great deal of him—it meant hours and hours of tedium. But he shrugged like it was no big deal. “I’ll get Nic to help. It’ll give her something to do besides paperwork.”

Wow, not even a twinge of jealousy here. Looked like I was finally over him.

DATING A HOT NEW GUY WILL DO THAT FOR YOU.

I hid a smile. Yeah, it didn’t hurt.

“Besides,” Dan added, “I have more time on my hands since the bloodsucker population seems to have gone down quite a bit lately. It’s not the SCU’s doing, though we haven’t been slacking on patrolling the streets. It’s almost as if they’re afraid to come out. Not that I’m complaining, but I wondered if we have some vigilantes out there among the Movement.”

“Not that I know of. But we did send a warning to the rogue vamps, telling them to join the Movement or be fair game. Attacks on the blood banks slowed down after that.”

Dan nodded. “We heard something about a big smackdown last week among the vampires, but we were asked to keep away so Alejandro could police his own. Did you have something to do with that?”

“Sort of. The Movement and the rogue vamps had a showdown. Alejandro won with the help of the Underground.”

“Why didn’t they want the SCU’s help?” He didn’t seem pissed about it, just curious.

“I’m not sure. Probably because it was impossible to tell the good vamps from the bad. We had to kind of incapacitate all of them and sort them out later.”

Unfortunately, Dan picked up on the one weasel word I hadn’t wanted to explain. “Incapacitate?”

I glanced away, knowing how he felt about my succubus. “You know . . . Lola. And Micah helped with the women.”

Dan made a face but didn't comment on my lust demon. "And did you use, uh, drastic staking measures to do that sorting?"

I winced. "The Movement did, yes. I was kind of out of it by that time." Not that I was going to tell Dan I'd totally lost control of Lola as he'd always feared. But I did explain about Shawndra's death and warned him the SCU might encounter more crazy vamps, if the ones still alive believed demon blood would make them stronger.

"Why did they start attacking the Movement anyway?" he asked. "It doesn't seem rational."

"Because they don't want the Movement to announce to the world that vampires really exist."

"Why not?"

"Because when Alejandro makes his announcement, he'll also announce that any good vamps need to join the Movement, and he has legislation in place to administer the death penalty to any vamps who suck vein without permission. In Texas anyway." Though the rest of the states would probably follow. "That makes sense. And I wish Alejandro the best with it."

"Why?" I didn't think he wanted the world to know vampires really existed.

"It'll be a lot easier on the SCU if we're allowed to work out in the open . . . and execute fang-bangers on sight."

"I hadn't thought about it that way." But he was right. "Then by helping us find the books, you'll be helping Alejandro come out that much sooner."

"Noted," he said with a nod.

Fang scrambled to his feet. CAN WE GO NOW?

I guess so. I rose, too. "We've taken up enough of your time. But thanks for doing this. You have no idea how much I appreciate it."

"No problem." Dan hopped out of his chair to open the door for us. "I'll do my best to find where Andrew hid the books and let you know as soon as I learn anything."

"Good." I just hoped I'd hear from him really soon. I had to find those books before Trevor

did. I didn't know what would happen if he got them in his hot little hands, but whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I spent the next several days trying to figure other ways to find the books—something better than aimlessly wandering the streets or hoping they'd contact me again. Sending me a mental map with a big red X on it would be nice

But since there was no luck in that department, our best shot seemed to be the traffic cameras. I'd sent Dan pictures of Andrew's car and his license plate number, but the red tape in the department had slowed that down, and he wasn't even going to be able to start looking until tomorrow. The only bright side was that Shade reported Trevor hadn't found them either.

I slumped on my living room couch in the early afternoon, hoping a clue or the voice would magickally come to me.

HOW'S THAT WORKING FOR YOU? Fang asked beside me.

I pulled his fuzzy ear. "Not so good. Got any better ideas?"

HAVE YOU HEARD FROM THE WITCHY CHICK YET?

"Marina Lester? No. I guess it wouldn't hurt to talk to her again. Good idea. I'll try her." Maybe there was some kind of Wiccan magick she could use to find them.

I hadn't thought to keep her number, and it was probably better to do this face to face anyway. Sure beat hanging around home.

Jumping at the chance to do something, I took Fang and headed over to her house on the Valkyrie. We arrived just as she was opening the door and a client was leaving. Our pixie-like redheaded host smiled. "Come on in. I don't have another appointment for a couple of hours."

Just inside the door, another woman stood. Tall and thin with long wavy dark hair, she wore a purple caftan with shiny silver moons and stars all over it—a stark contrast to Marina's petite jean-

clad form. “This is my friend, Erica Small,” Marina said. “And this is Val Shapiro and Fang. I told you about them.”

Really? How much had she revealed? We shook hands and I took a step back toward the door. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“It’s all right,” Marina assured us. “I was just getting some tea and we were going to chat.” Marina waved us toward the living room, then asked over her shoulder, “Would you like some tea?” as she and Erica headed for the kitchen.

I was more of a Coke drinker, but when in Wicca land . . . “Sure,” I called out, then took a seat in the living room. It had seemed pretty normal before, but now I realized it was decorated in soothing pastel shades of blue and green, with nothing harsh on the eyes, designed to put people at ease. The only things indicating her Wiccan background were a few subtle accessories—a yin-yang symbol on the pillows, pentacles on the coasters, that sort of thing.

Marina brought in the tea on a lacquered tray etched with a goddess symbol, and set it down on the coffee table. Erica added a plate of cookies that looked more healthy and good for you than good tasting. I decided not to risk it. “I hope you like chai,” Marina said.

“I don’t know. I’ve never had it.” I took a sip. It tasted hot and sweet, with cinnamon and other spices. “Hey, this is good.”

Erica smiled. “I’m glad you like it—it’s my special blend. I made the cookies, too.”

I glanced at Marina. “I wondered if you’d had any success in learning about that, uh, book I asked you about before.”

Marina took a sip of her tea as well, then said, “I’m sorry, but I wasn’t able to find anything on an *Encyclopedia Magicka* anywhere.”

I gave Erica a dubious glance, but Marina waved that away. “Erica won’t say anything. She’s my best friend—we share everything . . . including a new membership in the Demon Underground.”

Is that true? I asked Fang.

YEP. THEY'RE BOTH MEMBERS NOW . . . BOTH PART-DEMON.

"Really?" I asked with a smile, not sure how to respond to that . . . or how to ask exactly what kind of demon she was.

"Yes," Marina confirmed. "No wonder we always got along so well. Me with my prophecies and Erica with her ability to find things. We work together sometimes."

I perked up at that. What a useful talent. "That's great. Do you think you could help me find some lost books?"

Erica shrugged, looking embarrassed. "Maybe. The demon blood is pretty diluted in me, so it's not really easy. If my father were still alive . . . it was a lot easier for him."

"But she'd be happy to try," Marina said eagerly. "Wouldn't you, Erica?"

"Sure."

THANK YOU, Fang broadcast to all of us.

The two Witches jumped, and Erica's mouth spread in a delighted smile. "Wow, he really does talk. Where can I get a hellhound of my own?"

WELL, IF PRINCESS WOULD JUST COOPERATE BY GOING INTO HEAT . . . , Fang said suggestively.

We all laughed. "Princess is a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel," I explained. "And part hellhound. She and Fang have a thing." I glanced at Fang. "But she was a rescue dog. Wasn't Shade required to get her spayed in order to adopt her?"

HE WAS SUPPOSED TO, BUT WOULD YOU TRY TO DO ANYTHING TO PRINCESS AGAINST HER WILL?

He had a point. "I guess not. We'd hear about it for years." And it's not like we had an overpopulation of hellhounds.

Marina grinned. "I bet their puppies would be really cute."

I LIKE HER, Fang declared.

“Cute, yes,” I agreed. “But I’m not vouching for the attitude in that mash-up.”

HEY, Fang protested. YOU THINK I CAN’T TRAIN ’EM UP TO BE JUST LIKE ME?

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I said drily.

We all chuckled at that. But I had to admit that having a bunch of diva dogs like Princess running around—who figured the world owed them adoration—that would be even harder to take.

TELL ME ABOUT IT, Fang said. BUT YOU DO WHAT YOU GOTTA DO TO GET WHAT YOU WANNA GET.

Okay, TMI. *Way* too much information . . . I shoved a cookie in his mouth to distract him and changed the subject. “Erica, you said you might be able to help us find the books. How would that work?”

“There are a number of ways I’ve learned over the years to find something. The best is through an affinity spell.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that like calls to like. Do you have any small portion of the books still? Like a page, or a bookmark, part of the binding? If so, we can use a spell to call the two together again.”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“How about something the books were kept in, like a cloth bag?”

I shook my head. “No. I kept them mostly in a backpack but it was taken along with the books.” I felt my shoulders slump in disappointment.

“It’s okay,” Erica said with a pat on my hand. “There are other ways. Have you tried looking for them with a map and a pendulum?”

“No. Do you think that will work?”

“One way to find out,” Marina said. She cleared the tea and cookies off the coffee table and even discreetly picked up the cookie Fang had spit out and tried to hide under my chair.

THEY TASTE LIKE DIRT WITH MOLDY RAISINS, Fang complained to me alone. YOU TRY ONE.

I suppressed a grin. *I'll pass. But thanks for not spitting it out in Erica's face.*

HEY, I GOT SOME COUTH.

You do indeed.

I helped Marina spread out a map of San Antonio on the coffee table, and Erica drew a clear crystal out of a silk bag. The crystal looked like a fat stubby pencil, with five sides and a point at the end. The other end had a silver cap with a chain attached.

Setting the crystal down on the map, Erica explained, "This is a pendulum. If I hold it above a map and concentrate hard on something, the pointed end will land on the portion of the map where the object or person can be found."

"It's that easy?" I asked incredulously.

"It can be, if I know the object or person in question. To find something for someone else that I've never seen, I need to hold their hand and try to get a picture of it. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. It depends on how well you're able to concentrate."

"That's why we work together sometimes," Marina added. "Usually one or the other of us can answer a client's question."

That made sense.

"Let me show you how it works," Erica said. "Think of something you'd like to find. Something you know very well . . . and make sure you know where it is right now, so you can see that it works."

HOW ABOUT PRINCESS? Fang asked.

Well, we both knew her really well, and she was probably either at Shade's house or in the car with him and Trevor, so I said, "Okay, let's try that."

Erica gave us a slow grin. "I've never tried this with er, someone of the canine persuasion before. Let's try it with Fang by himself first and see what happens."

She held out her left hand, and Fang solemnly put his fuzzy paw in it. Erica then used her right

hand to pick up the pendulum. Holding the chain so it swung loose over the map, she closed her eyes and said, “Okay, Fang. Think of Princess, wonder where she might be.”

She moved the pendulum in a wide circle, skimming it barely above the map, then let it swing free on its own. Soon, the pendulum moved in tighter and tighter circles over one particular spot until it suddenly jerked to a halt and fell onto the map.

Erica opened her eyes and touched the crystal lightly. “Princess is located where the point of the crystal ends.”

Fang and I leaned in to look at that point on the map. “That’s where she lives,” I confirmed.

SHE’S GOOD.

“Fang must have a very strong image of the subject,” Erica said with a smile. She looked at me. “Would you like to try it?”

“Sure.” If this would help us find the books, I’d be willing to do a lot more than play spin the crystal.

“Okay, let’s start with something easy. What would you like to find?”

“Do I have to tell you what it is?”

She looked surprised. “Not really. It just helps me focus a little more.”

“Okay, let’s try it without telling you.” I wanted this to be a real test. Now, what should it be . . . ? “I’ve got it,” I said, and grasped her hand, closing my eyes and concentrated on finding Trevor. I put some oomph into it, not wanting Fang to be the only one who could do this. And before he could say anything, I added, *yes, I wanted you to hear that.*

After a few moments, I heard the pendulum thunk down on the map and opened my eyes to see it pointing to an address that looked vaguely familiar. Oh yeah, it was one of the blood banks.

“Is that right?”

“I don’t know. It could be. He was driving around today with a friend.”

“Oh,” Erica said, sounding disappointed. “Maybe you can try to find something when you

know where it is?”

Duh. Made me feel kind of foolish. “Okay, I’ve got something else.”

We went through our ritual again and this time the pendulum landed on the hospital.

“Oh, no,” Marina said. “I hope no one’s hurt.”

“No, it’s okay,” I assured her. “I was thinking of my roommate—she’s a trauma nurse in the ER there. And that’s exactly where I expected to find her.”

Erica gave me a relieved smile. “Good. It worked for you, then. Would you like to look for the books next?”

Convinced this was for real, I said, “Absolutely.” I rubbed my hands together, partially in anticipation, partially to ensure we would get a good connection. “Let’s do this.”

I placed my hand in hers, but this time I kept my eyes open and watched. The crystal spun in circles for several seconds, but didn’t zero in on any one location. This was taking a lot longer than the others. “Is something wrong?” I whispered.

Erica opened her eyes and stopped the pendulum. “Are you sure the books are in San Antonio?” she asked.

“Not really. We just assumed there wasn’t time to take them anywhere else.”

“Okay, let’s turn the map over.”

On the other side, the whole state of Texas was laid out in the bottom right corner of the map. Holding the pendulum above it, Erica said, “Okay, concentrate once more.”

It didn’t take long this time for the crystal to land, its pointed end squarely on the dot representing San Antonio. Unfortunately, with the small scale of the map, it didn’t give us much idea of exactly where the books would be.

“Hmm,” Erica said with a frown. “They’re here in town. How many books are there? Do you think they might have been separated?”

“There are three, but I doubt they’d be split up,” I said. The voice didn’t seem to indicate they

were in pieces.

“Okay,” Erica said with a sigh. “Let’s try again.” She turned the map back over and we tried again, but though the pendulum tried to waver over several different parts of the city, it gave up and just made big looping circles.

Erica stopped it, looking frustrated. “This may sound a bit strange, but I don’t think these books want to be found.”

I nodded. “You’re right. They don’t. But I was hoping we could force them to reveal their hiding place. Is there anything else we can try?”

Erica thought for a moment. “You know, I’ve never done this with more than one person, but given the power we hold collectively, maybe we could make it work if we all touched. Val, you and Fang hold my left hand and concentrate as hard as you can on the books . . . and Marina, if you would hold onto my left wrist and concentrate on amplifying their concentration, maybe we can make this work.”

We did as she said, and the pendulum seemed to go crazy. It would swing above one space on the map only to suddenly jerk away and swing somewhere else. “Concentrate harder,” Erica said with a grimace. “We’ve almost got it.”

I leaned into it with everything I had, then felt Marina stiffen beside me. In her flat, prophetic voice, she intoned, “That which you seek reveals itself to a select few. If you are of good heart, you will find what you desire in—”

A bolt of electricity slammed through us, entering through the crystal and moving lightning-fast through Erica, then zapping the rest of us, blasting us violently apart. Marina and Erica cried out and even Fang yelped in surprise as we flew backward.

I’d tumbled over in the chair, then scrambled to right it and myself. I glanced around, feeling panicky. “Is everyone all right?”

I’M GOOD, Fang said. JUST A LITTLE SINGED. BUT ERICA, NOT SO MUCH

Erica was holding her hands before her, her eyes wide with horror. Everywhere she had been touching us or the crystal, her hands and wrists were blackened with the power that had just surged through us. The crystal lay shattered in jagged shards on the map, the chain black and partially melted. Holy cow, that was some power.

I glanced at Marina, but she seemed much like Fang and me, feeling singed and stinging a bit, but mostly startled, not injured. “Let’s get you to the ER,” I said. “My roommate works there.”

Erica’s mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. She seemed to be in shock. “Marina, do you have a car?” I asked urgently. The motorcycle wasn’t made for this.

She nodded, though she still looked stunned.

“Can you drive?” I persisted.

“Uh, yeah, I think so.” She shook her head and seemed to get rid of whatever fog she was in.

“Of course, of course. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We helped Erica into the car and headed off. She moaned and I cringed at the sound. The woman was hurting because of me. “Wait,” I said. “I have a better idea. I know a demon healer. It’ll be faster.” And her injuries were minor enough that Shade wouldn’t be endangered.

I called Shade and explained the situation. He agreed to meet us at his place since it was closest. I gave Marina directions, then explained about Shade and his appearance. Didn’t want them freaking out at the guy who was about to be Erica’s savior.

On the way, I told Marina, “That lightning bolt caught us just as you were giving us a prophecy about the books.”

“It did?” Marina said. “No wonder I didn’t see the strike coming.”

“We didn’t see it coming either. I don’t suppose you remember the rest of the prophecy?”

She shook her head ruefully. “None of it, like usual.”

Through gritted teeth, Erica added, “The timing seems suspicious. Like someone didn’t want you to finish that prophecy or have us find those books. We almost had it . . .”

Yeah, it did seem suspicious. But I couldn’t understand it. I thought the books *wanted* me to find them. So what was this all about? Had we triggered an automatic protective spell of some sort? It was confusing.

We arrived at Shade’s place just as he and Trevor drove up.

I introduced them. “Shade, Trevor, this is Marina and Erica. Erica is the one who’s injured.”

“What happened?” Trevor asked, looking at the two women with some annoyance.

I helped Marina get Erica out of the car. “She got hurt trying to find the books,” I snapped at him. “Some compassion would be nice.”

He held up his hands defensively. “Just asking.” He darted a quick glance at Shade, but since he wore a deep hoodie and wasn’t touching anyone, the shadow demon’s features were inscrutable. “Do you need some help?”

That was obviously directed at Shade, as if Shade’s opinion was more important than anyone else’s. What was going on there?

Shade unlocked the door and directed them to his couch. His living room was a lot like Dan’s, only with more gaming electronics and bookshelves. It was spotless as always, though.

Fang sniffed the air. I THINK PRINCESS IS GOING INTO HEAT. BUT SHE’S HIDING, THE LITTLE MINX. SEE YA.

Fang took off, following his nose. Sheesh. Males—always at the mercy of their gonads. Oh well, we didn’t need him here right now anyway.

Erica half sat, half laid on the couch, her face twisted in a grimace of pain as she held her hands cupped in front of her.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Marina asked in a worried tone.

“Don’t worry, it will,” I assured her. Then, turning to Trevor, I added, “You can leave to continue your search if you want. We don’t need you here.”

“No, that’s all right,” he assured me smoothly. “I’d like to see this.”

Shade took my hand then threw back his hood. He probably wanted to reassure the Witches with his normality. “Do you know how this works?” he asked Erica.

Erica stared up into his face as if she’d suddenly seen her savior. With his head haloed by a lamp in the dark room, I could see where she might think he was an angel. “Sort of,” she gulped out.

“I am part shadow demon,” he said gently, “and when I’m not touching a being of this world, I look like this.” He let go of my hand, and Marina and Erica both gasped. They appeared fascinated instead of horrified by his swirls, thank goodness, or I would’ve asked Shade to stop.

He grasped my hand again. “I can channel healing energies from another dimension to heal Er-

ica's injuries, but I need to use another person as a sort of template, to show the healing energies what a whole system looks like."

"I can do that," Marina said eagerly.

Shade smiled. "Thank you. However, I must warn you both that you will share a lot more than that. You will share memories, fears, hopes and dreams with each other, but not with me. I am merely a conduit for the energies. If you aren't ready for that, let me know and we can find someone else to be the template or take you to the ER."

Marina and Erica looked at each other and smiled. "We've been best friends forever," Marina said. "It's not a problem."

Erica nodded. "I agree. What do we need to do?"

"Just sit on the couch next to each other," Shade began.

Trevor interrupted him. "Are you sure this is wise? A good use of your abilities?"

Annoyed, I said, "I can't believe you're saying this. Who do you think you are? Shade's manager?"

Trevor scowled at me. "I'm merely concerned for Shade. He told me what happened the last time he healed someone. We almost lost him. I don't want that to happen again."

"I don't think her injuries are bad enough to be a danger to me," Shade said softly.

He was too nice to the creep. "Don't forget, this woman got hurt because she was helping us look for the books," I reminded Trevor.

"How?" Trevor asked.

"What does it matter?"

"It might matter to Shade in the way he treats her."

Dang it, he always made things sound so reasonable. But it wasn't my story to tell, or I'd reveal the Witches' demon powers. I looked at Marina and Erica to see what they wanted to reveal.

Marina sighed. "Erica is a finder. She was using a crystal pendulum over a map of San Antonio.

We were close to finding the books when I, uh, went into a trance.”

“A trance?” Shade repeated with a puzzled look.

“Soothsayer demon?” Trevor asked.

Marina nodded. “The books must be protected somehow, because as I was doing my prophecy thing and the pendulum was getting closer to finding the books, the crystal shattered and we got the backlash. It felt like lightning or electricity ran through us. Erica got the worst of it.”

“What did the prophecy say?” Trevor asked, trying to sound nonchalant, but the eagerness on his face betrayed him.

“Nothing useful,” I told him. “She wasn’t able to finish it. Now, can we heal this nice lady?”

“Of course,” Trevor said.

Soooo glad we had his permission. But I bit that back as I watched Shade position the women on either end of the couch.

He moved the coffee table out of the way and sat on the floor facing them, lightly touching their wrists near the injuries. “Ready?” he asked as he blipped into focus.

“Ready,” they chorused.

“Then relax and try to stay conscious. This may hurt.” Shade lowered his head, and his face flickered in and out of the dimensions, in and out of the swirls. The swirls moved faster and faster, like a tornado, with small flashes of purple lightning zinging through now and again. All normal . . . for him, anyway.

Erica grimaced and strained, but her fingers and wrist slowly turned from a blackened mess to pink, healthy flesh. I expected him to stop when they looked whole once again, but he kept going.

Trevor looked alarmed. “What’s wrong? Shouldn’t he be done by now?”

“Yes,” I said, hating to agree with him.

“Then why isn’t he?”

“I don’t know,” I said in exasperation. “You’re the guy with all the answers. You tell me.”

“He must be healing more than her hand,” Trevor whispered in horror. “What else is wrong with her?”

“I don’t know—I just met her.” I stared at Erica, who was bent over double now, writhing in pain. “You think she has cancer or something?” That would be bad. Very bad.

“Shit. I hope not. Shade can’t handle that much.” Trevor took a step toward Shade, looking anxious. “We have to stop him. I need him.”

I blocked him with my body, maybe a little more forcefully than I had to. “Leave him alone. You don’t know what will happen if you touch him at this point.”

Trevor shoved me backward with both hands. “We both know what will happen if we don’t.”

I slugged him back, right in the shoulder, just to relieve some of my pent-up anger at the creep. “I can handle it. I can help him. I did it before.”

He got right up in my face and yelled, “If we stop him now, you won’t have to.”

I was prepared to yell right back, with my fists if necessary, but he darted around me and grabbed Erica’s hand to pull her away from Shade.

But Erica’s hand wouldn’t pull away. It was as if a circuit had been completed with the four of them, and Trevor stood there, jerking spasmodically, his eyes wide open and his mouth drooling. The others mirrored him, even Shade.

Oh crap, oh crap. This couldn’t be good. What could I do?

I couldn’t grab hold of anyone or risk being pulled into that myself. Should I wait it out? I was afraid it wouldn’t let up. Force wouldn’t work, reason wouldn’t work . . . all I had left was Lola. And since the only one in that unholy circuit she would affect was Shade, I concentrated on him, reaching out with all my might to grab onto his chakras.

But I couldn’t get a grip. I couldn’t snag his attention, not with all of his will focused on the healing.

Uh oh. Was that a green cloud forming above his head? That couldn’t be good. Was it one of

the other dimensions? Was he about to lose control and let more demons into our world?

Crap. Maybe if I distracted him . . . But how could I do it without touching him?

I couldn't touch him with my hand, but I could distract him by hitting him with something else. I glanced around the room and grabbed the first thing I found—a book—and threw it at him. It didn't seem to do anything, but something must have worked, because Shade moaned, “Stooooop meeeee”

Okay, maybe if I threw something harder and knocked him out. It had worked on me. Another book didn't do it, so I picked up a large crystal paperweight and threw it at his head. But he was jerking, so it missed and hit him in the shoulder instead.

Energy flashed from Shade into the crystal, turning it a virulent purple before it overloaded and exploded, sending the four of them flying apart. Trevor and the two women lay unconscious, but Shade was still alive and shaking, curled into a fetal position with that green cloud growing slowly over his head.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. I ran to him and helped him to his feet. He staggered toward the bedroom, and I followed him, wondering what he planned to do.

He pulled a knife from his nightstand, and I suddenly knew what he intended. Fear poured through me. No, I couldn't lose him. I'd just found him. I yanked the knife out of his hand and sent it spinning to the other side of the room.

Hugging him fiercely, I said, “I'm sorry, Shade. What can I do?”

“Kill me. Now.” His voice was muffled in my shoulder, but I could hear him quite well.

“I can't do that. You know I can't.” But the green cloud was growing above him.

Lola helped last time, so I hoped she could again. She wasn't quite back up to full force, but it would have to do.

Wrapping myself around him, I pulled Shade down onto the bed. His body was so tense, so concentrated on controlling his abilities, it was as if he didn't even know I was there. Instead of

shoving Lola into him, I eased her in slowly through the cracks in his defenses, letting her gradually take over his body. This way he didn't slam up his defenses.

It worked, but that green cloud continued to grow, creepily silent, and it didn't look good for the home front. I needed more ammunition, needed to give Lola more room to work. Skin to skin, that was the ticket. I let go of him long enough to try to strip off his clothes, but he struggled against me.

"I'm trying to help you, damn it," I muttered. "Work with me here."

Though he was still gritting his teeth, Shade helped me remove his clothes, then I whipped off mine as quick as I could and wrapped myself around him, urging Lola in through all his pores, filling up every one of his chakras, willing her to leave no room for anything else . . . like pesky alternate dimensions.

Though Shade remained rigid in my arms, I could see the cloud getting smaller. It was working! Together, we were getting a hold on his sanity. I pushed harder, urging him to stay with me in the here and now, here in this flesh, together.

"Val," Shade groaned and buried his head in my neck. "Don't stop."

No problem. I couldn't stop for anything. I didn't want to. It was as if something else outside myself had control of my body, something freeing all of my inhibitions. Lola pulsed through us, raising our awareness higher, until there was nothing left in the universe except Shade, me, the slide of skin against skin, and an incredible pent-up passion. His scent was so delicious, so yummy—like some primeval musk—I just wanted to eat him up.

Oh wow, this was . . . amazing.

Wait, a little voice inside me said. *Stop and think about this.*

Who needed little voices? Not me. Not Lola. Right here, right now, I no longer cared about my powers, no longer cared about being the Slayer. All I wanted was to be normal, like any other girl loving her guy.

Try Me

At last, I gave in to temptation.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Afterward, as we lay entwined together, Shade murmured nonsense about how much he adored me and covered my neck with kisses. I sighed and rested my head on his chest, happy and content. For the first time in my life, I felt really loved. It wasn't how I would have planned my first time, but it was still wonderful, without the awkwardness I'd expected.

I explored my body and senses mentally, probing for any changes beyond the incredibly obvious one. Nope, not a thing different—I still felt like me. My hopes rose. Maybe Shade was wrong. Maybe I wouldn't lose my powers.

I didn't regret finally doing the deed, but I did wish it hadn't happened like this. I'd really wanted to make our first time special, at a time and place of my own choosing, with candlelight, roses, and the whole schmaltzy deal. Us both losing control of our powers . . . *not* my go-to choice. But it was as if something outside me—outside *Lola* even—had grabbed hold of my emotions and driven me out of control. Something like an empath demon, maybe? I went rigid at the thought.

“Are you okay?” Shade murmured.

I gave him a quick squeeze to reassure him. “I'm good.”

“Are you worried about not having . . . you know, protection? Remember, different kinds of demons can't interbreed. And I'm clean.”

“I know. I'm just trying to understand how it happened.”

He levered up onto one elbow to look down at me and smoothed the hair from my face. “I'm sorry. I didn't intend for our first time to be like this.”

“Neither did I,” I assured him. “It wasn't your fault. But did you sense anything . . . odd . . . going on?”

“You mean like the spooky green cloud above my head?” he asked wryly.

“No, actually I meant someone manipulating our emotions . . . making it impossible to . . . er, stop.”

He frowned. “You mean that wasn't *Lola*?”

“No. Trust me, I know the difference.”

Fang scratched at the door. LET ME IN AND I’LL EXPLAIN.

He’d *explain*? It was getting dark outside, so I turned on the light. We dressed hurriedly—not that Fang would care, but I did—and opened the door. Fang trotted in and looked up at me with those big brown eyes, then lowered his head, looking guilty as hell . . . a classic hang-dog expression.

“Explain what?” I asked.

IT WAS ME, he said, sounding miserable. PRINCESS AND ME, I MEAN.

“I don’t understand,” Shade said.

That made two of us.

Fang heaved a doggie sigh. IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. YOU SEE, PRINCESS IS IN HEAT, WHICH MEANS SHE’S PRETTY HARD TO RESIST. He shrugged. SO I DIDN’T.

When I stared at him blankly, he added, YOU KNOW, WE DID THE DEED, HOOKED UP, STUFFED THE MUFFIN—

“We get the idea,” I said, holding up my hands to stop the flow of unwanted images. “What does that have to do with Shade and me?”

WELL, I DIDN’T REALIZE IT AT THE TIME, BUT YOU AND I ARE PRETTY HOOKED IN TOGETHER. SO ARE PRINCESS AND SHADE. SO WHEN THE EMOTIONS RAMPED UP, WE ALL, UH, KIND OF . . . SHARED IN THE GOOD TIMES.

I cringed at his wording, but that made sense. Looks like I’d mistakenly accused Trevor.

“Like a feedback loop,” Shade said.

EXACTLY, Fang said, and I got the distinct impression he felt no shame for sharing in our “good times,” but was definitely sorry he’d caused this to happen.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that sharing myself . . . Talk about TMI. And how about the other guilty party? “Where’s Princess?” How did *she* feel about all of this?

HIDING, Fang said. SHE’S EMBARRASSED.

Really? I didn't think that word was even in her vocabulary.

I JUST HAVE ONE QUESTION, Fang continued.

I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it, but Shade asked, "What's that?"

WHAT'S WITH ALL THE STIFFS IN THE OTHER ROOM?

Stiffs? Oh, crap, I'd forgotten about the others. Shade and I shared a mortified glance, then rushed into the living room.

Shade turned on a light, and Trevor rose unsteadily to his feet. Relief surged through me. Sheesh, never thought I'd be so glad to see him alive.

Marina and Erica were still passed out on the couch. Shade felt for their pulses and nodded. "They're okay. This is the normal unconsciousness after a healing. It's best to let them come to by themselves."

I glanced around, expecting to see crystal shards littering the carpet, but the paperweight had broken into four irregular lumps and lay blackened on the carpet.

WHAT HAPPENED HERE? Fang asked, sniffing at it.

I answered, since I was probably the only one who knew all of it. Stabbing a thumb toward Trevor, I said, "Genius here tried to stop the healing by grabbing Erica and pulling her out of the loop. He ended up getting sucked in instead." I grimaced. "Then they all went into convulsions."

Trevor, still a bit shaky, glanced at the broken crystal and the books strewn around the floor. "So you threw things at us?" he asked in an incredulous tone.

"Well, your idea didn't work out so well, so I had to find some way to break the connection." He glared at me, and I added, "Hey, *my* idea worked."

Shade looked up from his examination of Erica, still touching her wrist. "I'm glad it did, Val. I always wondered what would happen if someone interrupted a healing. Now I know."

"But how could the crystal stop you when the books didn't?" I asked, confused.

Shade thought about it for a moment as he perched on the back of the couch and kept his fin-

gers lightly on Erica's pulse. "I guess the crystal was able to absorb some of the energy. It interfered with the circuit just enough to destroy it."

"It shouldn't have been necessary," Trevor said impatiently. "It shouldn't have taken that long to heal her burns."

Shade's expression turned sheepish. "The damage *was* confined to her arms and hands, but she had . . . something else wrong with her."

"What?" Trevor demanded.

Shade shook his head. "I'm sorry, but that's private . . . her choice whether to reveal it or not."

What a great guy—and he could *heal* people. It made me so proud of him. I moved behind the couch to hug him and give him a kiss. "Did you completely cure her?" I asked, hoping their pain hadn't been in vain.

Shade smiled at me. "Yes."

"What does it matter?" Trevor bit out. "Shade, you took too big a risk. And for what? To cure someone you don't know? For a problem she didn't even ask you to fix?"

WHOA. Fang rocked back on his haunches. ISN'T THIS DUDE SUPPOSED TO BE AN EMPATH DEMON? SHOULDN'T HE HAVE SOME, YOU KNOW, EMPATHY? WHAT'S UP WITH THE ATTITUDE?

Exactly what I was wondering.

"It was my risk to take," Shade said softly. "And I judged I could handle it."

"Obviously you couldn't," Trevor retorted, and flung his arm out to point at the women on the couch. "Look what happened."

Shade tensed. "It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't interfered."

"I had to do something." Trevor ran a hand through his hair, messing up his immaculate hairdo. "You're too important to risk like that."

THAT'S INTERESTING, Fang said. WONDER WHY MR. PERFECT IS FALLING APART?

I was afraid Shade would go all mushy with Trevor's compliment, so I challenged Trevor. "You

said that before you grabbed Shade—that you needed him. For what?”

Shade grew very still. “That’s a good question, Trevor. Why am I so important to you?”

The empath demon froze for a moment as well, but recovered quickly. Giving us his practiced smile, he said, “Hey, buddy, you know how it is. I don’t have many male friends, and we’ve become like brothers in such a short period of time. I’d hate to lose you.”

I wanted to call him on his crap, but Shade squeezed my hand, so I kept quiet instead and let him handle it.

Keeping his voice even as he released my hand and went all swirly, Shade said, “Oh, I think it’s more than that. You glommed onto me when you realized I’m part shadow demon, and you’ve been all buddy-buddy ever since.”

I blinked at Shade, surprised. Then again, my guy was no dummy. I should have given him more credit.

YES, YOU SHOULD, Fang agreed.

“No, no,” Trevor protested. “I—”

“You had me fooled for a while,” Shade admitted. “But you became even more friendly when you learned I was the only known shadow demon in existence. You do need me for some reason. Does it have something to do with the books?”

Fang’s ears perked up. GO, SHADE!

Trevor stared at Shade, his fake smile fading as he tried to weigh Shade’s reaction. But the whirls revealed nothing as Shade waited for a response. Trevor glanced at me warily, but I worked on keeping my face relaxed. I really wanted to hear the answer to this question.

Trevor sighed and sank down onto a chair, bending over to stare at his clasped hands. “Shadow demons can reach across dimensions, open portals to other realities.”

So far, he wasn’t telling us anything we didn’t know.

“The books aren’t just an encyclopedia,” he explained. “They’ve also been spelled to be a por-

tal. That's how my father was trapped."

"Oh, I get it," Shade said. "You need my help in getting your father out of the books."

Trevor winced. "That's right."

Well, that was one of the few things that came out of his mouth that sounded like truth.

Sounding relieved, Shade said, "Why didn't you just say so?"

"Shade's one of the good guys," I added. "You didn't have to pretend to be his friend to get his help."

Trevor grimaced. "I wasn't pretend—"

Shade held up his hand to stop both of us. "Enough, please. Val is right. That's what the Underground is all about—helping each other."

"I didn't realize," Trevor said. "I've never really been part of it before. All I know is that the Underground in LA lost the books my father was trapped in. I had no reason to believe you would be willing to help me."

"Of course I will," Shade assured him.

JUST MAKE HIM OWE A FAVOR TO THE UNDERGROUND IN RETURN, Fang suggested. MAKE HIM APPRECIATE IT MORE.

Fang must have said that to both of us, because Shade took my hand and shook his head slightly at the hellhound. Too bad. It was a good idea.

"How would I go about it?" Shade asked.

Trevor appeared eager now. "I'm not sure, but there's some theory on the subject. I think it's a lot like what you do when you heal someone or bring demons through from another dimension. You know, transfer the energy from there to here."

That left another unanswered question. "So if you need a shadow demon to release your father, and there are no other known shadow demons, how were you planning on springing dear old Dad before you found Shade?"

Trevor shrugged. "I hoped there'd be a spell or something inside to tell me how to go about it."

I heard a moan from the opposite end of the couch, and Marina sat up, holding her head. "What . . . what happened?" she asked, her eyes wide.

We turned to her to reassure her everything was all right, and Trevor rose, looking all bouncy now that he was getting what he wanted. "I'll leave you to it, then," he said cheerfully. "I need to find my father."

Shade wished him good luck and Trevor left, shutting the door behind him. Erica groped her way to wakefulness, too. After we'd gotten them each a glass of water and they'd marveled at Erica's healthy unblackened flesh, we explained what happened.

"My energies don't discriminate one kind of injury from another," Shade said. "So when I found another, older, problem, it took longer than I expected. Trevor thought something was wrong, so he tried to stop it."

Erica covered her mouth with both hands, looking mortified. "I'm so sorry. I didn't even think."

Marina grabbed her arm and shook it, an expression of unholy delight on her face. "Didn't you hear him? He said he *healed* you."

Erica's mouth dropped open. "You mean . . . I . . . you . . . ?" The hope on her face as she stared at Shade was almost painful to see.

"You're whole," Shade said with a smile.

Erica threw her arms around him and beamed from ear to ear. "Oh, goddess, thank you. Thank you, thank you, *thank* you."

Marina joined her, and Shade was almost smothered by the two grateful women.

I THINK THAT MAKES HIM A SHADE SAND . . . WITCH, Fang quipped.

I laughed. Not at Fang's horrible pun, but I couldn't help but share in their joy.

"Do you know what this means?" Erica asked me, apparently unable to stop grinning.

I shook my head. “Haven’t a clue.”

“It means my husband and I can finally have a baby.” She let go of Shade and put a hand to her chest as if to hold in the emotion. “Marina knows. We’ve been trying so long, but I couldn’t—” She broke off and burst into tears.

Marina joined her and they let go of Shade to hug each other and bawl.

Pain, injuries, death . . . these I could deal with. But two ecstatic, sobbing women? I was way out of my league. I stood there feeling helpless, not knowing what to do.

DON’T WORRY ABOUT IT, Fang said, sounding unconcerned. THEY’LL COME UP FOR AIR SOON.

And so they did . . . eventually. Wiping tears from her eyes, Erica said, “I can’t wait to tell my husband.” Turning to Shade, she said, “How can I ever repay you?”

Shade shook his head. “Just pass it on. Help someone else from the Underground when they’re in need.”

“Is that all?” Erica asked in surprise. “It seems so little compared to what you did for me.”

“It won’t seem that way to the other person,” I reminded her. “Besides, you got injured trying to help us.”

She tried to get to her feet, but the deep couch seemed to hold her captive. I held out a hand to help her, but misjudged my strength and almost fell on top of the tall woman. Bracing myself, I tried again, and was able to assist her up off the furniture.

For some reason, that apparently meant it was my turn to get hugged by both of them. I endured it with a smile, but was happy when they left. I was glad for Erica, but all those emotions could wear a person out.

Fang snorted. TRY LIVING WITH PRINCESS WHEN SHE’S IN HEAT.

Nope. Didn’t *even* want to go there.

The hellhound sighed then added, I’D PROBABLY BETTER CHECK ON HER.

He trotted off and Shade and I collapsed back on the couch. He put an arm around me, snug-

gling me close. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. When I tried to help Erica up right then . . . it was harder than I expected.”

He squeezed me tighter. “You knew that would happen, didn’t you? After . . . what we did?”

“I guess so. It just took me by surprise.” And, though I hadn’t really admitted it to myself, I’d hoped for a Hollywood kind of ending. The kind where true love won out over everything else and allowed the heroine to keep her powers, win the hero, and live happily ever after.

Unfortunately, this was reality, not the movies, and I was screwed.

Wincing at the unintended double entendre, I thanked heaven that Fang was distracted by his girlfriend.

Unwilling to repeat any of that to Shade, I said, “It’ll take some getting used to. I just need to figure out how to handle it.” I needed some time to test my limits, find a way to deal with this new version of Val Shapiro. “I guess I can’t be the Slayer anymore,” I said, trying out the idea in my head. I didn’t like it much. “What does that make me?”

“Precious,” Shade said, and kissed me.

That was sweet, but not very helpful. “No, really. What should I do?”

“Do you really need to do anything?” he asked. “You can do what you’ve always done. You just need to be more careful.”

I didn’t think it would be that simple. “Maybe,” I said doubtfully. “But how do I tell Micah . . . and Alejandro?” I couldn’t imagine how to start that conversation.

“Why tell them yet? It’s not like you’re hitting the streets every night, staking vamps anymore. And the fewer people who know, the fewer attempts will be made to take down the Slayer.”

A sensation like fear spiked in me. Would I become the target of a slayer hunt? “Yeah, there is that,” I said slowly. “I guess I can wait until it becomes absolutely necessary.” After I found a way to completely rearrange my life to accommodate this new reality.

I closed my eyes and rested my head on Shade’s chest. I *so* didn’t want to think about this now.

Lola perked up a bit, sending my body tingling and making a lewd suggestion as to how I could change the subject. I was considering it—great distraction—but as I ran my hand suggestively over Shade’s stomach, it growled at me.

I couldn’t help it, I chuckled.

“I’m sorry,” Shade said, looking embarrassed. “I’m hungry.”

Come to think of it, so was I. “Shall we go out and get something to eat, then?”

“Sure, after I take a shower.”

We both got cleaned up, then headed for the front door. I slapped my pocket for my keys then stopped abruptly. “Uh-oh.”

“What?”

“I left the Valkyrie at Marina’s house.”

Shade laughed. “And I left my bike at yours.”

We grinned foolishly at each other. “Looks like we’re ordering in,” I said.

Fang came back in, his ears perked up. DID I HEAR SOMETHING ABOUT FOOD?

I rubbed his ears. “You chow hound, you. I thought you were going to check on Princess.”

YEAH, WELL, HER PRECIOUSNESS NEEDS A LITTLE ALONE TIME RIGHT NOW, IF YOU CATCH MY DRIFT.

I did.

Shade chuckled. “Princess can be a handful at times.”

I picked up my cell to call my favorite pizza place but paused when I noticed I had two messages. “Someone must have called while I was in the shower.”

“Who?”

“Dan and someone else.”

I dialed my voice mail and listened to Dan’s message. Smiling, I told Shade, “He’s narrowed down the area where Andrew must have hidden the books. He wants me to meet him downtown—

at the Alamodome.”

“Great,” Shade said. “Call him back and tell him we’ll meet him as soon as possible. I’ll call a cab.”

As he made his call, I talked to Dan and arranged to meet him right away at the stadium, then listened to my other message. It was Marina. I expected more gushing thanks, but that wasn’t why she’d called. I frowned at the phone.

“What is it?” Shade asked.

“Marina says she has something very important to tell us, and we need to call her back right away. She sounded upset.”

“We have some time before the cab gets here.”

Shade slapped together sandwiches and grabbed Cokes and a bag of chips as I dialed her number. I held the phone so Shade could hear as we munched.

“Oh, good,” Marina said. “I’m so glad you called back.”

“Shade’s here, too. What’s up?” I asked.

“Erica and I were so distracted by her great news that we couldn’t think about anything else. We were talking on the way home about what we experienced and compared notes.” She paused. “Remember when Shade said we’d share thoughts and memories?”

“Yes,” Shade said. “That’s normal during a healing session.”

“We did . . . but we also shared with someone else. Trevor.”

“Trevor?” I repeated in surprise. “Oh, it must have happened when he got caught in the circuit.”

“I don’t know,” Marina said, “but Erica and I compared notes and we both got the same thing from him.”

UH-OH, Fang said. I HAVE A FEELING THIS AIN’T GONNA BE GOOD

I second that feeling. “What did you get?”

“Trevor has been lying to you.”

Oh yeah? Go figure.

Shade pressed closer to the phone so we were cheek to cheek. “You mean about why he was being so friendly to me? We know that.”

“You know that he needs you to get his father out of the books?”

“Yes, he told me that,” Shade said, looking relieved.

Marina persisted. “And that he’s not an empath demon or a keeper?”

“*What?*” Shade, Fang and I all exclaimed in unison.

“That’s right,” Marina said hurriedly. “The reason he’s been keeping his nature hidden is because he and his father are both highly powerful—and highly *dangerous*—mage demons.”

Well, I’ll be damned . . .

“It gets worse,” Marina added. “His father caused the 1906 earthquake in California. That’s why the keeper locked him inside the books.”

“But Trevor isn’t that old,” Shade protested.

“Mage demons can live a very long time,” Marina said. “Trevor is much older than he looks.”

“That’s right,” I said. “He even told us that.”

Shade stiffened as Marina continued, “With those books and the spells inside them, he and his father could control the entire world.”

Oh, crap. I stared at Shade in horror, grabbing his hand so he didn’t go all swirly on me. “We need to find those books before he does”

Shade closed his eyes, looking as if he were in pain. “And *I* just told him where Dan is meeting us to find them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“You *what?*” I said, whipping my head around to stare him in the eyes. I had to grab his hand to see his expression, and smashed the bag of chips in the process.

He winced. “I’m sorry, but while you were talking to Dan, I also called Trevor.”

“Why? You know the books told me to find them before he could.”

“No,” he said patiently. “You never told me that.”

I closed my eyes and smacked myself in the forehead. “You’re right, I didn’t.” I’d been too worried Shade would tell Trevor. Crap.

Marina was trying to get our attention on the phone. I held the cell so we could both hear again. “Sorry. Was there something else?”

“Yes,” she said, as if she hadn’t unloaded a big enough bombshell. “I didn’t understand this, but you probably will. He convinced the freelance vamps to attack the Movement . . . and has been inciting the Underground to kill the vamps.”

Must be the vigilantes Dan had mentioned. I *knew* Trevor was a total scumbucket. But it was no consolation to be right. We needed to stop him.

“But why would he *do* that?” Shade asked.

“Because he knows the Movement and the Underground both want the books, and he wanted to keep them off-balance, distracted,” Marina explained. “Plus he didn’t want any competition in his bid for emperor of the world.”

Dang. I should have seen that—it made total sense. But we had to make sure he didn’t do any more damage. “Thanks, Marina. We really appreciate the call.”

“No problem. We owed you.”

“Not anymore,” Shade said. “This information wipes the slate clean. Thank you.”

We gobbled down our sandwiches and waited outside for the cab. Thank heavens it showed up right away. Holding Shade’s hand so his swirls wouldn’t freak out the young driver, I got into the cab. “The Alamodome, please.”

The cabbie didn’t even turn to look at us. He glanced in the rearview mirror. “Ain’t nothin’ goin’ on there tonight, lady.”

With that accent, he had to be straight from the Big Apple. A New York cabbie in San Antonio? Well, I guess that wasn’t the strangest thing in this city. “Just take us there.”

“Wait,” Shade said. “I told Trevor we’re meeting Dan there.”

“That’s right. But he doesn’t know we’re on to him,” I whispered. “Maybe we should let him find them, then take them away from him.”

“How?”

Good point. I had no idea how my lack of powers would work against a *mage* demon, fergawd-sakes.

“I ain’t got all night,” the cabbie said. “Ya wanna ride or dontcha?”

“Yes, we do,” I snapped. “Take us to . . . HemisFair Park.” It was across the highway from the Alamodome, not far from where Dan had suggested.

The cabbie turned around to grimace at us. “Where? It’s a big park, lady.”

“Uh, near the Institute of Texas Cultures?” It was in the Southern part of the park, closest to the Alamodome.

“You got it.” He glanced down at Fang who sat beside Shade. “Hey, waitHey, I don’t allow no dogs in my cab.”

“This isn’t an ordinary dog,” I said.

“Oh, yeah? He looks like a mutt to me.”

Fang growled. I’LL MUTT HIM.

“That’s it,” the guy said as Fang bared his teeth. “Everybody out.”

Dang. If only Fang had kept his muzzle shut. “No, wait.” I hesitated for a moment. I hated to leave Fang behind but there was no time to call another cab. “We’ll pay you extra.”

“Nope. No dogs. I’m allergic. And he looks like he sheds.”

“We have to go now,” Shade whispered urgently. “Trevor can sense the books if he gets within five hundred feet, remember?”

Yeah, I did. And if the books were hidden somewhere in the center of the huge stadium or park, that might explain why he hadn’t found them just driving around. But if he walked around those areas and the encyclopedia was hidden there . . . Damn. Still, I hesitated, not wanting to leave my best back-up.

GO, Fang said. YOU DON’T NEED ME FOR THIS.

Maybe. But I always wanted Fang, especially now that I was more vulnerable. I could use Lola to force the cabbie, but it was probably best to keep my trusty hellhound out of danger. Shade was my back-up now. Sighing, I kissed Fang on his fuzzy nose and let him leave.

“Okay, the dog’s gone. Let’s go,” I said.

Good thing the cabbie didn’t give me any more lip or I might’ve sicced Fang on him. But he set the car in motion, so I called Dan to let him know the change of plans.

It seemed to take forever to get there, but we finally did. I paid the driver—with a lousy tip because of his attitude—and got out at the plaza where two dozen or so flags flew, honoring the nations of all the immigrants who made up Texas’ diverse culture. Above the Institute loomed the Tower of the Americas, a giant spear of light against the night sky with what looked like a UFO stuck on top. This object wasn’t unidentified, though, it was a revolving restaurant and observation deck.

We found Dan in the far corner of the Institute’s parking lot, leaning against the door of the SCU’s Silver Dodge Ram.

“Why the change of plans?” Dan asked when we reached him.

I shrugged. “Because we accidentally told Trevor we were meeting you at the Alamodome, and want to find the books before he does.”

Looking quizzical, Dan asked, “How do you do that accidentally?”

“Never mind,” I said, not wanting to explain the whole thing or embarrass Shade. “Do you know where Andrew hid the books?”

“No, but I can narrow it down. We picked him up on cameras near Mood’s house that day and followed the cameras until we saw him get off at an exit. I knew you’d want to see this, which is why I asked you to meet me.” He opened the truck door and pulled something from behind the seat. Leaving the door open to provide more illumination, he showed us some grainy photos. “This is from the traffic camera at I-37 and Durango.”

I peered at them. “Yep, that’s his beater all right.” Hope rose within me. We were finally getting somewhere!

Dan nodded. “It shows he got off at the exit, and this photo,” he pointed to another one, “shows he didn’t get back on until forty-five minutes later, at the same place. Time enough to park somewhere and hide the books.”

That was the exit we’d taken to get here. Feeling excited, I said, “Awesome. You did a great job.”

Shade’s phone rang then and he checked the number. “It’s Trevor. He probably wants to know where we are.”

“Don’t answer that,” I said quickly. “Let him wonder.”

“Right,” Shade said and turned off the phone.

“Do you need me to distract the guy or something?” Dan asked.

I thought for a moment, but I didn’t know what a mage demon could do and didn’t want to embroil Dan in more Underground business. He’d helped enough. “No, we’ll take it from here.

Thanks a lot, Dan. We really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

I suddenly remembered something. “Oh, and we found out who was inciting the vigilantes taking down the vamps. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of it.”

“You’re not going to tell me who it was?” Dan asked, sounding exasperated.

“No, sorry, I can’t. Underground business. I have to let Micah know first, and if he wants to tell you . . . “

Dan rolled his eyes, but nodded. He respected Micah and knew the fine line the demon leader had to walk. “Okay. Give me a holler if you need a ride or something.”

Oh, yeah, we might. “Thanks. We’ll do that.”

He got in his truck and left, and Shade said, “The park and Alamodome are both huge.” He pulled his deep hoodie forward to hide his face from any passersby, then stuck his hands in his pockets. “Any idea where the books might be?”

“No, I don’t, except maybe somewhere central.” I shook my head. “Why would Andrew hide them here? There’s lots of traffic through both areas.”

“What does it matter?” Shade asked, sounding harried. “Can you sense them? If we look in the wrong place and Trevor finds the books before you do . . . “

“No, but I haven’t tried. Let me find somewhere quiet.” The traffic noise was a little distracting. Not to mention the Christmas lights everywhere which seemed sooo out of place with what I was feeling right now.

Shade followed me into the park on one of the concrete pathways. “Can we afford to take the time?”

“Can we afford not to?” I snapped back as I hurried along the path, then immediately felt bad. “Sorry, didn’t mean to bite your head off. I’m feeling a bit stressed here.”

“Ditto,” Shade said grimly. “And I feel useless. I wish I could do more.”

“You’re not useless,” I assured him as I continued looking for a quiet spot. “You’re going to watch over me while I try to contact that voice.”

I spotted one of the many fountains that dotted the park, one with a waterfall cascading over stone steps. No bum sleeping on the bench nearby, so I sat down, let the soothing sounds calm me and went deep into myself I dredged up all my self-control and forced myself into calm, reminding myself to be patient.

After a short while, I felt as if someone was straining to reach me. I don’t know how I knew that, but I did. I concentrated harder and opened myself up as wide as I could. *Where are you?* I sent out into the universe. *There isn’t much time.*

Nothing. And this was taking way too long. Sighing, I opened my eyes and glanced to the heavens for help. There, filling my vision, was the Tower of the Americas blazing against the darkness.

That’s it! It had to be. Holy crap. The voice hadn’t wanted me to look up something on a computer. It wanted me to look *up*. “Any idea how tall that tower is?” I asked Shade eagerly.

“Seven hundred and fifty feet to the top mast.” He shrugged. “Sometimes trivia sticks in my brain.”

“And to the bottom level of the restaurant?”

“I don’t know . . . maybe six hundred feet. Why?”

“There,” I said with excitement. “The books are there—in the tower. Out of Trevor’s range.”

“Are you sure?” Shade asked.

“Absolutely.” I didn’t know how I was sure, but for the first time, this felt really right. “Let’s go.”

“Not so fast,” came a voice from behind me.

I jumped up off the bench and whirled around, my heart beating like a tom-tom. But it wasn’t Trevor, just two baby vamps looking for a bit of fun. How did I know that? Because the pimply-faced idiots had flashed their fangs and made the mistake of trying to control my mind, so I could

read theirs. And *that*, thank goodness, was not one of the powers I'd lost.

But I had lost my strength and probably the healing, too. Lola was still recovering, so I needed to get rid of them with the least amount of trouble. I grinned at them, which took them aback. "Seriously? You're trying to control *me*? Sorry, Benny and Fredo, isn't it? You may not realize it, but you're messing with the wrong people."

Shade threw back his hoodie and let his face show in all its swirly glory.

Benny and Fredo each took an involuntary step backward and, though I could read in their minds that they were frightened, they tried to hide it. "What *are* you?" Fredo asked.

My grin widened. "I'm the Slayer and this guy is a shadow demon. You know what will happen if you chow down a demon, don't you?"

"Or mess with the Slayer," Shade added, deepening his voice so it sounded more menacing.

From their appalled expressions and thoughts, it was obvious they did know, so I pulled two stakes out of my back waistband. "Your choice. Would you rather go mad from drinking our blood, or get staked in your black little hearts, hmm?"

They seemed rooted in place, not knowing what to do.

Shade took a step forward, flung his arms wide and yelled, "Boo!"

They ran.

I couldn't keep from laughing. "Boy, that was easier than I thought." Maybe I could still pull off being the Slayer without my powers.

"Yeah," Shade said, chuckling as well. "Now, let's go."

He grabbed my hand and we ran the short distance to the tower, which wasn't very far away. We had to pay to get in, then wait in line for the elevator. After what seemed like forever, we squeezed our way on, making sure Shade remained looking human, and the glass elevator started upward.

Instead of boring us with music, the elevator speakers droned on about the attractions here at

the tower. Originally built in 1968 for the World's Fair, the tower now housed a 4D ride, restaurants, gift shops, and a magnificent view from the observation deck.

San Antonio spread out below us like a twinkling carpet of lights as we travelled high above the city. About halfway up, I somehow knew, without knowing how, exactly where the books were above me. The ride seemed to take forever, but couldn't have been more than a minute. I tried to enjoy the view—I hadn't been up here since I was a kid—but I was too anxious to get this over with. I promised myself to come back at some point and enjoy it when I had more time.

Finally, the elevator stopped and opened, and we followed the crowd to the glassed-in observation deck on the third level. That's where my senses—my homing beacon—were leading us.

Shade leaned close, whispering, "Do you know where they are?"

"Yeah. I'm heading directly for them." The slight pull on my senses led me away from the windows and toward three banquet rooms built inside the deck.

Two of them had noise coming from them—raucous holiday parties—but the third was quiet. With any luck, the books would be in the empty room. I didn't fancy the idea of braving a roomful of strangers to peek under chairs and tables. "Try that door," I said in a low voice, pointing to the quiet room.

Shade pulled on the handle. "Locked."

Well, shoot. I'd hoped this would be as easy as scaring off those baby vamps. As Shade leaned down to peer at the lock, I glanced around, looking for a waitress or someone in charge. "Maybe I can say I lost an earring and get someone to open the door."

"No need," Shade said, and I looked around to see something shiny disappear into his pocket as he turned the handle and opened the door a crack.

"You picked the lock? My, my, you have all kinds of talents, don't you?" I said with a grin.

"You have no idea." He grabbed my hand and maneuvered me so I blocked the door. "Look at me as if we're having a serious conversation. When no one's looking . . . Now, *go*."

We slipped through the door, and Shade closed it behind us. “Where did you learn this stuff?” I asked in the dim room. It was lit only by the lights from outside the panoramic window, but the strains of *Jingle Bell Rock* made it seem festive.

He shrugged. “Part of being a Watcher for Micah.” When I reached to flip the lights on, he added, “Uh, maybe we should leave the lights off.”

“No problem. We’re in luck. I can feel the books on the far side of the room.”

We made our way over there, and found a portable bar against the wall. Groping underneath, I found a lump the right size and shape. Smiling, I pulled it out and set it on the bar, careful not to knock over the glasses and decanter. The large lump had been shrouded in a dark tablecloth to keep it hidden in the depths of the bar. Pulling the cloth off as fast as I could, I saw my familiar backpack.

Finally

I reached inside and touched the books, to make sure they were real. “Wow,” I whispered. “We really found them.” It was sorta anticlimactic. I’d more than half expected to have to battle my way through a legion of the undead or something. But no, here they were, lying innocently—and quietly—under my hand.

“Great,” Shade said. “Can you feel the dark magicks in them?”

“No, they feel the same as always.”

Shade laid his fingers on them, then frowned. “I feel . . . something. Not sure what. Like dark whispers in my head.” He jerked his fingers away. “Those things are dangerous. What are we going to do with them?”

I froze. “I don’t know. I didn’t think that far ahead.”

“We have to take them somewhere Trevor won’t find them.”

“I know, but where?”

“Out of town somewhere. We should leave now, take them far away.”

“Okay.” I slung the backpack over my shoulder and started toward the door, then stopped. De-

flated, I turned to face Shade. “We have a problem. Once we get downstairs, if Trevor is anywhere near, he’ll sense them and be able to follow us.”

“Maybe he’s still at the Alamodome,” Shade said in a hopeful voice.

“I doubt it. He probably left when we didn’t show up.” Something else occurred to me. “What if he realized Marina and Erica were able to read him?”

Shade slumped down on a chair. “He has to know. And he’s probably figured out that they’ve told us everything they know.”

Uh-oh. “You think they’re in danger?” I asked.

“No. He knows Dan narrowed down the books’ hiding place to somewhere near the Alamodome. I think he’s searching for them as fast as he can. And it’s probably only a matter of time before he looks up and makes the same connection you did.”

The lights overhead suddenly flashed on, blinding me.

“He did,” a voice said from the doorway.

I blinked. Oh, crap. It was Trevor, and he was pointing a gun . . . right at my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Run! the voice yelled.

It chose *now* to wake up? Too late. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. *Tell me something useful*, I shot back.

I stared at the weapon in Trevor's hand, noticing that he had a silencer screwed on to the end. With the noise of the parties and the tourists on the observation deck, no one would hear if he shot us. I ran through my options. My powers were gone, Fang wasn't here to distract him, Lola couldn't affect Trevor . . .

Damn it, I felt helpless. I hated it. I'd always said I wanted to be normal, but now that I was, I had to admit it totally sucked.

Now would be a really good time for some help, I sent to the voice, which definitely sounded like it came from the books.

Wait, it said, sounding strained.

Not helpful. Micah, Alejandro, Shade . . . they all expected me to retrieve the books, keep them away from the bad guys, and save the day. But what could I *do*?

Absolutely nothing.

Except maybe talk him to death. Hey, it worked for Fang "You're not really a keeper, are you?" I blurted out.

Trevor grinned, looking cocky. "That's right."

"Is there really any such thing?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then how did the keeper get separated from the books?"

Trevor shrugged. “Does it matter?”

You’re on the right tra—

On the right what? I demanded of the voice. *On the right track?* I had a pretty good idea of what that meant.

Shade took a menacing step forward. “You’d better run. We figured out what you were and called for help. The SCU, Underground, and the Movement are going to arrive at any moment.”

He called? When?

Trevor laughed. “You are such a bad liar. Look at Val’s face.”

I’m an idiot. “Sorry,” I muttered.

“I wouldn’t have believed it anyway,” Trevor assured me. “The Slayer would never call for help. She’s a glory hound—she wants all the credit for herself.”

Like hell. The way I remembered it, things had happened so fast, I hadn’t even thought to call for help. Then again, Dan had offered And I had a good reason for turning him down. *Not* because I was a glory hound.

Trevor interrupted my self-reflection with a gloating, “Sorry, Val, you won’t be taking *this* mage demon anywhere.”

We had to keep him talking until I could come up with a plan. Luckily, Shade asked him a question. “Are you really a mage demon?”

Trevor inclined his head in a regal nod. “Indeed. Though it took you long enough to figure that out. I thought you were the expert on demons, Shade.”

Shade let the taunt roll over him. “It was your shield,” he said. “We should have known you were hiding something.”

Looking as if he were enjoying this, Trevor said, “With the vamps and the hellhounds around, I had to block my thoughts. Couldn’t let you know what I was really up to.”

“And what *are* you up to?” I asked.

“Oh, the usual,” he said, waving his gun airily. “Riches, power, world conquest. With the spells in those books, I can have anything I want.”

The bastard was *enjoying* this.

“I thought you wanted to save your father,” Shade said. “Was that a lie, too?”

“Oh, no, that was the truth. He’s not really *in* the books, you know. They’re just a portal to another dimension where he’s been trapped. With your help, I can release him.” Trevor’s grin widened. “You did say you’d help me, remember?”

I clenched my fists, wishing I could strangle him, use Lola on him, stake him . . . anything to shut him up and keep him from using Shade that way.

Shade squeezed my wrist warningly. “Calm down, Val. Remember, he can use emotions to power spells and he no longer needs to hide behind his shield.”

“Oh, stop,” the metrosexual said with a pout. “You’re ruining my fun.”

“Really?” I asked. “I think you’re bluffing. Your father probably put the shield on you as a kid—and you’ve already admitted you can’t do spells without reading them from these books. That’s why you brought the gun.”

Trevor’s grin faded. “Well, aren’t you the clever one? But you know, I think the gun will suffice.” He moved closer and extended the gun at full length, aiming right for my forehead. “And I don’t need *you* at all. Shall we see how easily the Slayer can heal from a bullet in the brain?”

No one could heal from that. Fear skittered through me as alternatives ran through my mind. I tensed, preparing for action, hoping my instincts would help me do the right thing.

Shade jumped in front of me, spreading his arms wide. “No. If you kill her, I’ll never help you. I’d rather die first.”

How mortifying—someone was protecting *me* for a change.

Trevor lowered the gun to his side, looking exasperated. “What do you *see* in her?” Then, before Shade could answer, he said, “Never mind. I don’t care. All I want is those books, and my father

released from them.” Waving the gun toward the bar, he said, “Put them down and I won’t shoot you.”

I hesitated, and he frowned. “Do it *now* or I might shoot out your kneecap, just for fun. Or Shade’s.”

Seeing he meant it, I backed up slowly and put the backpack on the bar, my mind whirling with plans to stop him. Shade moved with me, keeping his body between the gun and me.

“Take them out of that ratty bag and put them where I can see them,” Trevor ordered.

I did as he asked, and Trevor seemed to relax. He gazed at the books and his eyes took on an acquisitive, unholy gleam. He moved closer until he was a few feet away. “Finally. I’ve been waiting for this moment over ninety years.”

No wonder the Underground in LA didn’t know who he was. “Gee, you don’t look a day over eighty-two,” I drawled. I couldn’t help it. Sometimes my mouth just ran away with me.

“Very funny,” he snarled. “Now release my father, Shade, or I’ll hurt her.”

Neither of us could see Shade’s expression, but the shadow demon didn’t move a muscle. What was he thinking? Was he going to try something heroic and get himself killed?

Do it, the voice urged.

“Do it now,” Trevor unconsciously echoed. “And I’ll let you both live.”

I hesitated. Who did the voice belong to? I’d always thought it was the books, but could it be Trevor’s father? Why else would the voice urge me to let another mage demon loose on the world? With the most dangerous books on the planet, no less.

Trust me

Shade wasn’t moving and Trevor was looking even more pissed. Oh, crap. We were going to die. Could I trust this unknown voice?

Did I have a choice?

I had to prove Trevor wrong. I had to let go of my need to be the world’s savior and trust in

someone else. Taking a deep breath, I nodded at Shade. “Do it.”

I still couldn’t see his expression, but I’m sure he was confused. The ribbons of light where his face should be swirled faster.

“I don’t know how,” Shade said, sounding hesitant.

“Try,” Trevor insisted. “It should be like what you did with the healing. But this time, you’re not transferring healing powers from one person to another, you’re transferring my father from one dimension to another.”

Still, Shade hesitated. “I’ve been fighting all my life not to let other demons into this world.”

Trevor grimaced. “Is that all? Don’t worry. It’s a barren plain of existence. He’s the only demon there. You think I’d let you bring through *competition*?”

Now that sounded like truth. I nodded at Shade. “Try it.” I just hoped I was right.

Tensing, I moved closer to Shade. I wanted Lola to be able to grab him and stabilize him if something went wrong.

Trevor moved closer, too, though he kept the gun trained on me. “Hold his left wrist,” he told me. “I want to be able to see his face.”

I wanted to see it, too, so I did as Trevor demanded.

“Now put your right hand on the books,” Trevor said.

And repeat after me . . . my irreverent nature couldn’t help but add.

Slowly, Shade rested his hand on the top book, his expression tense.

Do it now, the voice all but yelled at me.

Squeezing Shade’s wrist, I whispered, “Go ahead. I’m here for you.”

I don’t know why, but that seemed to make up his mind. Nodding, Shade closed his eyes and I could almost feel him concentrating.

“No tricks now,” Trevor warned.

“Shh,” I said. “Don’t distract him.”

A small lime-green cloud, shot through with bright flashes of fierce lightning, appeared above the bar. “That’s it,” I whispered. “It’s working.”

I let go of Shade and backed away from that virulent, creepily silent maelstrom, and so did Trevor. We both watched as it grew bigger and bigger, until it was a round sphere of roiling energy about six feet across.

“Are you . . . sure about . . . this?” Shade gasped out.

“Bring him through!” Trevor said. With his tense attitude and eager, green-tinged expression, he looked positively diabolical.

“I don’t . . . know . . . how.”

Suddenly, a man flew out of the cloud as if he’d been thrown, landing face down on the ground between us. He rolled onto his back, looking *way* stressed out, but the spitting image of Trevor.

Mr. Jackson, I presume.

“Father,” Trevor exclaimed.

Another man leapt out as well, landing on his feet, his fists clenched. This one looked just as wild-eyed, but bigger, meaner, like a huge lumberjack with a bushy black beard and veins popping out on his forearms. Oh, crap. How many more demons were going to come through? I should have known Trevor had lied about that.

“Keep him off me,” the father shouted.

The other man pointed at Shade, yelling, “Don’t close that portal yet. No more demons are coming through.”

I recognized that voice. It was the one who’d been talking to me. “Do as he says,” I told Shade. “He’s on our side.” I hoped.

“Shoot him,” Trevor’s father screamed as he scrambled to his feet.

But Trevor, caught off-guard by the appearance of the second man, didn’t move fast enough. I grabbed the heavy decanter on the bar and whipped it at his gun hand.

Nailed it!

The pistol flew out of Trevor's hand. The big bear of a man muttered some words and made a throwing motion at the two Jackson boys. Instantly, it was as if they stood rooted in place, struggling against invisible bonds.

The big man grabbed my hands. "That won't hold them long." His words tumbled out fast, but polite. "Valentine Shapiro, I beg your assistance and that of your friend to send these two felons back through the portal and rid the world of them for good."

Now that's what *I'm* talkin' about. "Hold on, Shade, a little longer," I called out, then turned to the man who held my hands. "You got it," I said with a grin. "What do you need?"

"Just trust me . . . and give me everything you got."

Lola was waking up with my proximity to such a large, handsome specimen of the male species, but I didn't think he was talking about that . . . or my paltry material possessions. "How?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he threw his head back and muttered some words that sounded like Latin.

A thread of magick from inside the man latched on to that tendril of interest from Lola and twined around it, braiding the two strands into a larger, stronger rope of energy. Letting go of my left hand, he thrust his right hand toward the struggling Jacksons. A strong breeze came out of nowhere, blowing from us to them, and the magick pulled on more of Lola's energy. Just as they broke free of their entanglement and tried to rush us, the rope of energy reached them, and I could feel it circling them like a lasso, anchoring them in place.

They hurled insults and curses, but nothing else, thank heavens. All my attention was caught up with noticing that Lola's energy was leaving me in a steady stream. Crap, this guy was draining my chakras . . . just like Lola did to the men she came in contact with. "What are you doing?" Would he drain me dry to stop the man who appeared to be his nemesis?

"I'm sorry," he gritted out, "but I need your strength. I'll try not to harm you."

Try? What was this *try* crap? I struggled for a moment, then realized he was exhausting his own energy just as much as he was mine. If I wanted this to succeed, I had to work with him, not against him. Shade was being a real trooper, holding the portal open, though he was bent over with the strain. Could I do any less?

I sank to my knees and let loose all the restraints, letting the guy take everything he needed. He fell to his knees alongside me, never letting go of my hand, never stopping the braiding of our energies. We faced the gorgeous panoramic view, the villains on our right, the portal on our left, and the sound of *Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer* playing next door.

What a strange way to die.

Slowly, we drew the Jacksons, kicking and cursing, closer to the bar and the portal. While we struggled with the bad guys, Shade lowered the books to the floor so the portal flickered in front of the bar. Good. All it would take was one good shove and they'd go through. Though where I could muster up the strength for that, I had no idea. I swayed, barely able to stay on my knees.

They were within a couple of feet of the bar, but had dug their heels into the carpet, their teeth gritted, to slow their forward movement.

“Just a bit more,” my partner said. “Now, push!”

Huh? There was no way I could push with my body, so I did the next best thing. I gathered up everything I had within me . . . Lola's energy, my energy . . . hell, any bit of energy I could scrape up . . . and threw it at him.

As I fell limply to the floor, the man shoved both Jacksons through the portal, yelling, “Close it!”

The pulsating green portal irised shut, cutting off the braided cord and sending all that energy barreling back along our connection. Oh, crap. I tried to ward off the backlash, but no luck. It slammed back into both of us like Thor's warhammer, and I knew no more.

Sometime later, I came slowly awake, expecting the worst. But I felt remarkably . . . fine. Opening my eyes and

switching on the light, I found myself back in my bedroom again, this time with a strange man lying beside me. But it wasn't some random stranger—it was the man who'd gotten rid of Trevor and his father for good. What the heck?

SHE'S AWAKE, Fang said from outside the door. OPEN THE DOOR, DEMON BREATH. FIND SOME USE FOR THOSE OPPOSABLE THUMBS.

I smiled. It was good to hear Fang's voice again.

The door opened and Fang flew through it, jumping up to lick my face furiously. YOU ALMOST DIED. DON'T EVER DO THAT TO ME AGAIN.

Hugging him to me, I ruffled his fur. *I'll try not to.*

He snuggled next to me and laid his head on my leg, sighing with pleasure. Shade entered—apparently the “demon breath” Fang had addressed—followed by Micah. “What happened?” I asked.

“You don't remember?” Micah asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Uh, let me see. Bad guy waves gun around, green cloud vomits demons, good guys kick butt, then nothing.”

He chuckled. “The backlash from the power rebound knocked the two of you out, but Shade had the presence of mind to call for help.”

I winced. Yeah, like I should have done *before* it happened.

“How did you get us down from the tower?” I couldn't imagine.

Shade started to explain, but Micah held up a hand. “Let's just say it taxed our ingenuity, but we had assistance from the SCU and the Movement.” He smiled. “Everyone wanted to help, and they fought over who would act as the templates to heal the two of you.”

No wonder I felt so good. I shook my head at Shade. “You shouldn't have.”

“It was necessary,” Shade said. “I *am* careful, you know. Micah and some others monitored me to ensure I was in no danger.”

Well, that was all in the past. But I wondered . . . “Who won the fight to heal us?”

“Josh was your template and Andrew helped with the other guy,” Micah said. “They wanted to

atone for causing the books to go missing in the first place.”

Oh, the books. Where were they?

CHILL, Fang said. THEY'RE ON YOUR DRESSER. YOU GUYS GOT RESTLESS WHENEVER WE TOOK THEM AWAY SO WE LEFT THEM NEAR YOU.

Good. He was right—I could feel them there.

Then I realized what Micah had said. Josh and Andrew? Eww. “Does that mean we’ll be living with their memories the rest of our lives?” I searched my mind for any lingering adolescent male idiocy, but couldn’t find it.

“No,” Shade assured me. “You were unconscious so it didn’t transfer. It took a lot longer to heal you that way, but he didn’t get any of your memories and you won’t have his.”

THANK HEAVENS, Fang said with a sigh. I DON’T KNOW IF I COULD LIVE WITH YOU IF YOU HAD JOSH IN YOUR BRAIN.

Me either. Feeling the man stir behind me, I stood up and looked down at him.

He opened his eyes and smiled. “Valentine Shapiro. We did it.”

“Yep, but . . . who *are* you?”

He swung his legs to the floor, then rose unsteadily and came around the bed with his hand outstretched. “Jack Grady, the real keeper.”

Exactly as I’d suspected, but Trevor had claimed the same thing.

NO LIE, Fang said. HE’S TELLING THE TRUTH. BUT IT’S HIS STORY TO TELL.

“How’d you get trapped in there with Trevor’s father?” I asked.

“It’s a long story,” Jack said.

Micah held up his hand. “Why don’t we do this in the other room so you two can get something to eat and drink first?”

“Now you’re talking,” Jack said with approval. He gathered up the books and brought them with him, as if he couldn’t bear to let them out of his sight. As he set them on the dining room table,

I poured us each some juice and Shade started breakfast on the stove.

“Go ahead,” Shade said. “I can cook and listen at the same time.”

Jack nodded. “You see, when the folks in Ireland burned my mother as a witch, my father brought me and my sisters to California.”

Shade stopped what he was doing at the stove. “They *burned* her?”

Jack shrugged. “I was just a boy at the time.”

“Go on,” I urged him, not wanting to go off on tangents.

He nodded. “I’ll make this short. My father had heard about the gold, so he hoped to make his fortune there, though we were too late for the rush. My sisters and I joined the Demon Underground, of course, and the Underground had taken the encyclopedia away years before from a full mage demon . . . at great cost, you might imagine.”

We nodded, and I made hurry-up motions.

He shrugged. “The books chose me as keeper—”

“How?” I said, then shook my head. I wanted to know, but I wanted to hear the end of this story first. “Never mind. Go on.”

“So when the mage demon’s son—that would be Garrett Jackson—stole one of the books and caused an earthquake that nearly tore California off the map, it was my duty to hunt him down and stop him.”

Shade placed some toast and jelly in front of us and Jack grabbed a slice. He took a huge bite and closed his eyes in ecstasy, as if he’d just had a taste of heaven from a five-star chef. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I had anything to eat?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said impatiently. “Eat all you want later, but continue your story. How did you stop Garrett Jackson?”

After he swallowed another bite, Jack said, “Being keeper grants you the power of the books to draw on, providing your intentions are pure and you know what you’re doing. He was too powerful,

so I used the magick in the books to create a doorway to another world, then tricked him into going through it.” He paused for another bite.

“And?” Micah prompted.

He looked rueful. “Unfortunately, the only way my ruse would work was to go through it with him and close the door behind me.”

I stared at him in awe. Now here was a real hero.

He grimaced at my expression. “Don’t look like that. Time passes faster there, and we didn’t age. I kept him from contacting his son, and we got along all right until I learned he’d found a way to whisper to folks on this side.”

The light dawned. “Oh, so that’s who was talking to Josh and Andrew. Trevor’s father—he was the dark magick everyone sensed?”

“That’s right.”

“So the books *aren’t* bad as Trevor said?” Shade asked.

Jack swallowed, then answered, “Well, they can be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“Like a mage demon’s, I take it?” Micah said.

“Yes, but the books themselves aren’t dangerous. It’s the intentions of the person reading the spells that matters.”

“Okay, go on,” I urged him.

“Once I learned what Garrett was doing, I knew his son would sense the awakening. I blocked that link and had Andrew hide the books in the best spot I could think of.” He glanced at me. “I tried to get *you* to find me, but Garrett kept fighting me, blocking me.”

Well, that explained the intermittent nature of Jack’s communication. And, speaking of that . . . “Can you still speak to me in my mind?” I asked, not sure I liked the idea.

Jack shook his head. “No, I’m no longer the keeper of the books. Once I got back into this world, they chose someone else.”

Uh-oh. What kind of person could handle that kind of power? “Who?”

“Why, you, of course,” he said. “That’s why the books made their way to you when you were a child.”

Micah frowned. “What about my father? He had the books before Val.”

“He could have been a keeper if he’d had the training, but when the books became aware of Valentine, they chose her as the next keeper.”

Me? “But . . . but . . . “

“And that’s why I was able to use your magick to send them back. Together, two keepers and a shadow demon were stronger than two mage demons. Once you gave up every last iota of your power to save the world, you became the keeper.”

No, no, I couldn’t take this responsibility. “I can’t do that. I won’t be able to protect the books.” I glanced guiltily at Micah, wondering if Shade had filled them in on the no-longer-a-virgin newsflash.

Micah nodded. “When you didn’t heal as fast as we expected, Shade explained what happened.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “You mean now that you are no longer as pure as the driven snow, you lost your powers?”

Oh, crap. I forgot he’d been in and out of my mind. I winced. “Yeah, that. I’m no longer the Slayer. I won’t be able to safeguard the books the way they should be.”

“No problem,” Jack said. “Didn’t you hear me earlier? Being the keeper comes with a great deal of power.”

As I gaped at him, Fang broadcast the question in my mind to everyone at the table. YOU MEAN SHE WON’T BE A WUSS ANYMORE?

“I don’t understand what a wuss is,” Jack said, “but I’m certain the new keeper is no such thing. In fact, she’ll be very powerful.”

I gulped. “But I don’t know how to use that kind of power.”

Jack waved that away as if it were nothing. "I'll teach you."

"You don't mind giving it up?" Shade asked.

"Nope," Jack said. "Being keeper can be quite a burden, too. I'm glad to retire."

I had just about resigned myself to being normal and now he wanted me to be some kind of super demon? I gulped. How could I possibly handle this?

AS YOU ALWAYS DO, Fang said, jumping up to put his paws in my lap. WITH PANACHE, A QUIP AND YOUR FAITHFUL HELLHOUND BY YOUR SIDE.

Somehow, that wasn't very reassuring.

As I stroked his fuzzy ears, Fang added, REMEMBER MARINA'S PROPHECY?

I thought for a moment, then murmured, "Seek not, lest you find more than you bargained for. Keep not, lest you are prepared to meet your destiny." Well, I had definitely found more than I bargained for.

Jack smiled. "Are you ready to meet your destiny, Val?"

It would help if I knew what that was

Wondering, I placed a hand on the books. Something seemed to snick into place, as if reestablishing a bond I hadn't known was there, making me whole once more and opening up a vista of possibilities for the future. The books couldn't speak, but they did have an awareness, a sentience, unlike any inanimate object I'd ever seen. They seemed to promise me joy along with an important purpose in life, but not without hard work, sorrow and pain.

Should I accept this destiny? I took a deep breath, knowing that no matter what decision I made, it would change my life forever.

"I'm ready."

Try Me

Reader Letter

Thanks to all of the fabulous fans who took the time to read my books and leave me such wonderful feedback on Facebook—you're awesome! Not to mention incredibly wise and discerning. :-)

Val and Fang (and Shade!) have received such a positive response that BelleBooks and I decided to publish this third book and at least one more. It's such fun to write about their adventures that it's not a hardship at all. So, to whet your appetite for the next one, an excerpt of chapter one follows.

Enjoy—and let me know what you think on my Facebook page!

Parker Blue

Colorado Springs, CO

MAKE ME

Book Four

The Demon Underground Series

Coming Spring 2012

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

I crouched in the darkness of an ancient live oak, armed with only my wits, listening for any sign of the vampire. Nothing but the rattling of branches and the souging of the wind through the leaves here on the longest night of the year.

Creepy.

I wasn't hiding out of fear. I just wanted to get a bead on him before he found me first. Now that I'd lost my strength, speed, and healing ability, and I hadn't learned how to use my supposed new powers as keeper of the *Encyclopedia Magicka*, I needed any advantage I could get. And the live oak, with its leaves and gnarled branches as big around as my waist, shaded me from the revealing gaze of the moonlight.

"Val Shapiiiiiro," he crooned, the eerie mocking sound seeming one with the breeze. "Come out, come out wherever you are"

Too close! He'd found me.

Lust for the hunt sizzled through my blood and I whirled toward the sound. "Make me," I growled.

He rushed me, inhumanly fast. I leapt up to one of the low branches and lashed out with a *savate* kick, hoping to score a field goal with his head. He ducked.

Too slow, dammit. I stumbled for a nanosecond on the uneven surface then regained my balance as he appeared on the bough beside me. His infuriating grin flashed in a sliver of moonlight. I struck out with my fist, hoping to smash the fangs off his face. Blocked.

I couldn't let him take the offensive. And though I might have lost my speed and strength, I still had my martial arts training. I battered him with a series of blows, but he was so fast, none of them connected where I wanted. I tried a low blow—a kick to the 'nads, but he stopped that, too.

Frustrated, I leapt up to grab the branch above me, planning to swing up and over it and use the momentum to knock him off his perch. Instead, he tackled me. I lost my grip and we both hit the hard-packed earth, knocking the wind out of me.

Taking advantage of my momentary pause and gasp for air, he straddled my waist and hooked his legs over mine so I couldn't move, then grabbed my wrists and pinned them above my head.

Crap. He was too strong—I couldn't get free, no matter how hard I struggled.

He grinned, looking way too happy with the situation. “Yield, darlin’?”

Never. I still had one weapon left. I hated to use it, but I hated to lose even more. I called on the succubus inside me and she leapt to the fore, eager for action. The purple eye flash that came with the use of my demonic powers reflected in his eyes as my succubus Lola surged forth and slammed into his chakras, instantly making him my slave.

His lust for Lola made it impossible to disobey me. I paused for a moment, trying to catch my breath enough to tell him to shove off.

His smile turned wicked as he released my wrists and his hands started to wander where only one man's hands had gone before.

This was *so* wrong. “Get off me,” I yelled, shoving against his shoulders.

He took his time rolling off, his lascivious gaze and knowing smile never leaving my face as he hooked his thumbs in the belt loops of his jeans.

I scrambled to my feet, releasing him from Lola's clutches so fast it made us both stagger. “*Seriously*, Austin?” He looked different without his Stetson . . . edgier, more dangerous.

Alejandro's cowboy lieutenant ran a hand over his face and chuckled softly. “Hey, you were the one who played your ace in the hole . . . darlin’.”

My face heated. Crap. He always made me feel young and foolish. No matter that at eighteen, I'd been slaying vampires for years. No matter that I could make any man alive do whatever I wanted. No matter that brave cops, vampires, and demons feared me as the Slayer. None of it mattered when Austin gave me his knowing look. It was as if he gazed

deep into the insecurities of my soul and laid them bare.

I averted my gaze and pretended I was absorbed in brushing twigs and leaves from my T-shirt and jeans. “I had to,” I muttered. “It was the only way I could win.” He’d already beaten me once. I couldn’t let him win two out of three.

“I know,” he said softly. “Took you long enough.”

I shrugged. “I don’t like to use my powers unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“And that’s why you lost the first time. If I’d really been out to get you . . .” He shrugged.

“I know, I know.” I’d be dead. Thank goodness, this was only practice. I didn’t want the word to get out to the general vamp population that the Slayer had lost her powers, or I’d be challenged by every one of them not affiliated with the New Blood Movement . . . and maybe even some *in* the Movement.

“Best two out of three?” I asked. This time, I’d be faster on the draw with my secret weapon.

“I’ll pass,” he drawled. “Now that you’ve figured out when to play your hole card . . . well, let’s just say I don’t think either of us would be comfortable doing that again.”

Boy, make me squirm, willya?

Someone slammed into me from the side, taking me down again. Another vamp—Luis. I shoved Lola into him so fast, he didn’t get a chance to try anything. “Stop! Don’t move.” I scrambled to my feet and, just in case Austin tried anything more, I hooked him with one of Lola’s energy tendrils as well. “You, too.”

I’d learned my lesson and wasn’t about to—

Wham! I was down on the ground again. A third vamp? *You’re kidding me.*

I shook my head. No problem. I could handle three without even breaking a sweat. I lunged out with Lola to take care of *numero tres*, and got nothing but a hard slap across the face.

Crap. It was Rosa. Lola wouldn’t work on her. “Stop her,” I gritted out, sending a surge of power along Lola’s energy strands.

My two marionettes obeyed instantly, grabbing her and pulling her off me. They looked murderous, so I added, “Hold her—don’t hurt her.” Alejandro wouldn’t be pleased if he found out I’d let two of his lieutenants tear the third limb from limb.

Rosa—smart girl—didn’t fight them. She just smirked at me.

“Lucky hit,” I said, raising up on one elbow to feel my jaw. She packed quite a wallop.

“Not lucky,” she spat. “You, you call yourself the Slayer? If I used my knife, you’d be dead right now. *Muerto.*”

I could have pointed out that she’d be one dead undead bloodsucker with a single word from me, but kept my trap shut. After all, they were helping me regain some skill and confidence by sparring with me in private. It was my own

damned fault that I'd assumed they'd come at me one at a time. The least I could do was act grateful.

And I was, I really was. I hadn't known until tonight that the Movement used the clearing in the center of the woods around the mansion as their private training grounds. But I'd ignored their suggestion and avoided the open space. Instead, I'd taken to the trees, hoping it would give me some advantage. Not so much.

I cast around with my senses but didn't detect any more bloodsuckers. "Any others waiting in the wings to take a swing at the Slayer?" I asked before I got up again. I didn't want to meet the ground up close and personal for a fourth time.

"No," Austin and Luis answered in unison.

Good. I got slowly to my feet. The adrenaline was gone, so I was starting to experience the pain of tonight's punishment. Dang, it sucked to feel human. It was times like these that I regretted giving up my powers. "Why do you care anyway?" I asked Rosa. She'd sounded so pissed.

Still held captive by the other two vamps, she rolled her eyes. "Because you need to protect Alejandro's back."

"Why? I'm not his bodyguard. Doesn't he have, like, a whole *win* of bloodsuckers to do that for him?" I knew Tessa's prophecy made him think of me as his personal talisman, but sheesh, that was taking it too far.

"For when he goes to Austin," she clarified.

I glanced at the cowboy vamp, confused. "Goes to Austin for what?" And, realizing she'd calmed down and the two guys were both still in Lola's thrall, I let them go, despite Lola's protest.

Rosa rubbed her arms and sulked. "Stupid *chiva*. Not him, the city. Maybe you've heard of it? The capitol of Texas?"

Oh.

But . . . "Since when are we going to Austin?" I asked.

Luis folded his arms. "Alejandro hasn't told her yet."

He and the cowboy vamp exchanged an unreadable glance. "Let's take her to him," Austin said.

I heaved a sigh. Secrets. I hated secrets.

Luis nodded briefly, and the three of them headed back to the house. They didn't even look back, just assumed I'd follow them like a good little girl. Hell with that. They could keep their secrets.

Fang trotted up from his place on the sidelines. Part scruffy terrier, part telepathic hellhound, part smart-aleck-bane-of-my-existence, he sat on his haunches and grinned up at me. POUT MUCH?

We'd decided to have him sit this one out to see what I could do without him. I thought he'd be upset that he couldn't mix it up with me, but with that snarky comment, I wondered . . . "Did you enjoy watching them beat the crap

out of me?” I asked.

He snorted. NOT SO MUCH. BUT IT WAS NECESSARY.

“Maybe,” I muttered. “But is this meeting necessary? Not so much,” I mocked.

YOU DID AGREE TO WORK FOR HIM UNTIL THE BOOKS WERE FOUND AND HE COMES OUT OF THE CLOSET.

I know. I’d found the books, but he hadn’t done the second part yet.

SO, THIS IS PART OF YOUR JOB. WHAT’S THE MATTER? YOU’VE ALWAYS WANTED TO TRAVEL MORE.

Yeah, but not this way. Okay, yes, I was pouting. So sue me.

Fang didn’t say a word, just looked at me with reproachful brown eyes framed in his adorably fuzzy face. Dang. He’d pulled out the big guns. I gave up. “Okay, okay. I’m coming.”

I hobbled toward the house, feeling every ache and pain the vamps had hammered into me. More like eighty than eighteen.

NEXT TIME, WEAR SILVER, my unfeeling hellhound advised me.

I’d thought of that, but it seemed like cheating when the vamps were supposed to be helping me. Then again, being a vampire was kind of cheating, too, wasn’t it?

Fang just snorted, which I took to mean he agreed with me.

Alejandro’s people had been careful not to create any paths into the woods, but it was easy to follow the lights to the house. I trudged up to their back door and saw that Austin was waiting there for me, holding the door open. He’d put his hat back on, too, so he looked more like himself. “I’m coming,” I muttered.

“I know.”

He grinned again, but didn’t move when I passed him. Our energy fields intersected in the close confines of the doorway and Lola licked into him. I didn’t pull back—he deserved a good licking.

The tall, lean cowboy didn’t react, though. He just raised an eyebrow as if to say, “You really want to go there?”

POINT TO AUSTIN, Fang said with a laugh.

Shut up. I shoved past him into the kitchen, disappointing Lola once more. “In his study?” I asked without looking back at him.

“Yes, ma’am.” Austin didn’t bother to hide the amusement in his voice.

I tried not to stomp out my frustration as we headed to find Alejandro. Luis gestured me into the room I'd visited far too often. Very masculine, very Mediterranean, very dark . . . except for the sun-drenched mural of a beach scene covering the wall across from Alejandro's desk. Then again, if I'd been unable to see the sun as long as he had, I'd probably want a view like that, too.

I flopped into a chair across from Alejandro and his massive wooden desk and said, "So, boss, what's this I hear about us going to Austin?"

Luis scowled. He hated it when I treated Alejandro so informally. That's why I did it, of course, and Alejandro didn't mind. Luis and Austin took up positions behind their boss and I wondered where Rosa was.

MAYBE SHE WAS PUT IN A CORNER FOR SPILLING THE BEANS, Fang suggested.

"I am afraid the trip to Austin is necessary," Alejandro said.

"Why?"

The vamp leader absently rubbed the bust of Cortes he kept on his desk. "The situation in the state capitol has changed. The legislation we were counting on to protect us when we come out and keep the unaffiliated ones in their place is . . . stalled."

I grimaced. I hated politics as much as I hated secrets.

MAYBE BECAUSE THEY GO HAND IN HAND.

Probably. "What does that mean, stalled?"

Alejandro shook his head, a puzzled expression on his face. "I wish I knew. My calls are not being returned, and there has been no communication from my supporters. We shall have to go there to see what is happening."

I was all for getting those laws in place so the Movement could come out and I could satisfy my contract with Alejandro, but . . . "Why do you need me?"

"Because you can go where I cannot," Alejandro said with a smile.

Who was going to keep a vampire out of anywhere he wanted to go? "Like where?"

Austin's mouth quirked up. "Like daylight."

Oh.

"Indeed," Alejandro agreed. "You are the only one I can trust to protect my interests while I'm there, to live in my world and not reveal what you discover, to act for me during the daytime."

Fang huffed with amusement. HE WANTS YOU TO BE HIS RENFIELD.

I didn't find that at all funny. It was a pretty tall order. But, unfortunately, I couldn't argue with the vamp leader's logic. "Rosa seemed to think you wanted me to be some kind of bodyguard."

Alejandro waved away my objection. “Rosa is overly protective. We cannot invade another vampire’s territory without permission. Without it, we risk . . . much. I have gained that permission, but have agreed to bring only four with me. I shall take Austin and Vincent, and leave Luis and Rosa in charge here.”

No wonder Rosa was peeved, with only two vamps to guard her boss’s back. “If I’m the third, who’s the fourth? Fang? Does Fang count?”

FANG ALWAYS COUNTS.

“No, Fang does not count as the fourth,” Alejandro said with a smile, “though I see no reason why he cannot come. The fourth will be Jack Grady.”

Grady? The former keeper who was supposed to be training me on how to tap the magick potential in the *Encyclopedia Magicka*? Ha. The only thing he’d done the past few days was pig out on Gwen’s food and hog Shade’s bed. “Why him?”

“The encyclopedia can be a powerful weapon in our favor. He knows how to wield it, and you do not. We need him to get you up to speed as fast as possible.”

Good luck with that. I’d tried with no luck.

“I have already spoken with Mr. Blackburn and the Demon Underground has agreed to let me take both of you,” Alejandro said. “I have made arrangements for a place to stay so we can leave tomorrow night when the sun goes down.”

Why not? I’d only been to Austin a few times before, and it would be something different than the same old, same old. “Do you have any idea how long we’ll be gone? Mom will kill me if I miss Christmas.” And since Mom and I had kind of a truce going on, I didn’t want to screw that up.

“It’s little more than an hour away,” Austin drawled. “I think you’ll be able to come home to mommy when you need to.”

I clamped my lips on an unwise comeback and resolved not to let him get to me. “Okay. Should I pack?”

“Yes,” Alejandro said. “Pack for a couple of weeks. It’ll make it easier than returning here for a change of clothing or necessities. You may go now if you wish.”

I wished. Glancing down at Fang, I asked, *You ready?*

In answer, he got up and trotted away, pausing in front of the study door to glance expectantly over his shoulder at Austin.

The cowboy rolled his eyes, but followed Fang’s unspoken bidding and opened the door for him.

How do you do that?

CHARISMA, BABE, SHEER CHARISMA.

Shaking my head, I followed him down the hallway and out the front door. I straddled my Valkyrie motorcycle and waited for him to jump up into his own leather and sheepskin seat, then put on his goggles.

I sped home on the dark, silent streets of San Antonio. There weren't many people out in the early hours of the morning, so I was able to drive on autopilot and make plans for the unexpected free time. I could take a hot bath to soak out my aches and pains, maybe even get some extra sleep before I had to show up at Alejandro's tomorrow. After all, who knew what awaited us in the state's capitol?

When we arrived home, I took off Fang's goggles and he jumped down.

"Hungry?" I asked. Usually, he'd be pestering me for food right about now.

SORRY, BABE, BUT IT'S THE WINTER SOLSTICE.

"So?" What did that have to do with anything?

A dark cloth fell over my head and someone grabbed me, trying to pin my arms. What the . . . ? I struck out with my foot, connecting with someone who let out an "oof."

YOU'LL HAVE TO SEDATE HER, Fang said, and I felt the sudden prick of a needle in my arm.

My mind grew fuzzy. *Fang? What's happening?* No response.

"Thanks, Fang," another man said. "We owe you one."

I had only one thought as I lost consciousness. *Traitor.*

Try Me

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MOONSTONE

Allie Emerson is destined to fight evil and save the world.

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Chapter One

One minute, I was on a ten-foot ladder adjusting the TV antenna on the twenty-four-foot trailer behind Uncle Sid's house, where I lived with my mother, Faye. The next minute, I sailed off the ladder, grazed an electric fence and landed face down in a cow pie.

Swear to God.

Though groggy and hurting, I rolled onto my back. A window in the trailer cranked open and I heard my mother scream. "Allie! Ohmigod! Somebody call 911!"

I was surprised Faye managed to open the window. She'd spent most of the last two years in bed since, at age thirty one, she Retired From Life. But really, call 911? We had no phone and I was the only other person in the area.

Who was she talking to? Blaster the bull? I smiled weakly at the thought of Blaster in a phone booth, punching in 911 with one gigantic hoof.

Okay, technically, I landed in a bull pie, not a cow pie. The mess dripping off my face was compliments of my Uncle Sid's prize bull, speaking of which . . .

It was then my wits returned. I felt the ground vibrate, heard the rumble of hooves. I reared up to see a half-ton cranky bull racing toward me, head down, mean little eyes fixed on my prone body.

Faye continued to scream shrilly. I moaned and crawled toward the fence, looking over my shoulder at Blaster who bore down on me like a runaway train. When I tried to stand, I slipped in the wet grass and landed on my belly. Oh God, he was just inches away. I wasn't going to make it! I rolled into a ball and screamed, "No, Blaster! Go back! Go back!"

Laying on the wet grass, trembling with terror, I watched as Blaster stopped on a dime, blew snot out of his flaring, black nostrils and released a thunderous blast of flatulence—that's what my teacher, Mrs. Burke, calls farting—and, of course, is the reason Uncle Sid named him Blaster.

"Back off, Blaster," I said between shallow, panicky breaths. "Good boy."

I hoped the "boy" comment wouldn't tick him off, what with his fully-developed manly-bull parts dangling in full view as I lay curled on the ground looking up. Yuck!

Suddenly my vision narrowed and grew dark around the edges. It was like looking down a long tunnel with Blaster front and center, bathed in light. A loud buzzing filled my head. The next moment, Blaster took a tentative step backward, then another, walking slowly, at first, then gradually picking up speed until he was trotting briskly backwards like a video tape on slow rewind.

Mesmerized by the sight, I sat up and watched Blaster's bizarre retreat back through the tunnel. At that precise moment, I should have known something strange was going on. But hey, I was a little busy trying to save my life.

As I crawled under the fence, my vision returned to normal and the buzzing faded away. I stood and swiped a hand across my sweaty face. At least, I *thought* it was sweat until a trickle of blood dripped off the end of my nose. Surprised because I felt no pain, I touched my face and found the blood was oozing from a puncture wound in the center of my forehead.

I glanced up at Faye, who continued to peer out the trailer window, her pale face framed in a halo of wispy blond curls, her eyes wide with shock. She inhaled sharply, and I knew another scream was on its way. I held up a hand. "Come on, Faye, no more screaming. You're making my head hurt."

"But, but, the bull . . . he, he . . ." Faye began.

I wasn't ready to go there. "I know, I know."

I staggered around the end of the trailer and banged through the door. Two giant steps to the bathroom. I shucked off my clothes and stepped into the tiny shower.

“You okay, Allie?” Faye asked.

She peered through the open doorway, paler than usual. Her right hand clutched the locket that held my baby picture, the one that makes me look like an angry old man. The only time she took it off was to shower.

“I’ll live,” I muttered.

“Weird, huh? Blaster, I mean. I heard you yell at him. Bulls don’t run backward, Allie.”

When I didn’t answer—what could I say?—she waited a beat. “Use soap on your forehead. Did it stop bleeding?”

“Yes, Mother.” I reached over and slid the door shut.

Deep sigh. “You don’t have to be snotty. I told you to be careful.”

The TV blared suddenly. Oprah. Not that I’m a spiteful person, but I blamed Oprah for my swan dive off the ladder. Late last night, a sudden gust of wind knocked over our TV antenna. When I got home from school today, Faye insisted she had to watch Oprah. Like that was going to change her life. I finally got tired of hearing about it and borrowed Uncle Sid’s ladder. Moral of story: Never wear flip flops on an aluminum ladder.

I turned on the water, stood under the weak stream and checked for damage. Other than a slight tingling in my arms and legs and the hole in my head, I seemed okay.

I towed off my curly, dark-brown hair and pulled it back into a messy ponytail. When I wiped the steam off the mirror, I saw a dark-red, dime-sized circle the size in the exact center of my forehead. I touched it gingerly, expecting it to hurt. But it didn’t. Instead, a weird sensation shot through my head, like my brain was hooked up to Dr. Frankenstein’s machine, that thing he used to make his monster come alive. I must have given a little yip of surprise because Faye said again, “You okay, Allie?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just a little sore.”

“Did you check the mail?”

“The first’s not until Friday. Today’s the twenty-ninth,” I said.

“Sometimes it comes early.”

The welfare check *never* came early. The state of Washington was very reliable when it came to issuing checks.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, not wanting to burst her bubble.

Wrapped in the towel, I took two steps into the living room/kitchen, reached under the table and pulled out the plastic crate containing my clean clothes. I dug around and found clean underwear, a tee shirt and a pair of cut-off shorts.

I slipped into my bra, once again thinking how cool it was I finally needed one. Though I hoped for peaches, I'd managed only to grow a pair of breasts roughly the size and shape of apricots. Oh, well, apricots are better than cherries. Our valley is called "The fruit bowl of the nation," hence, my obsession with naming body parts after produce.

I slipped into my treacherous flip flops, headed out the door and spotted Uncle Sid darting behind the barn. Faye says Uncle Sid is not a people person but I thought he was just trying to avoid Aunt Sandra and her constant nagging. That woman's voice could make a corpse sit up and beg for mercy.

I trotted down the driveway, stopping suddenly when I spotted a pair of denim-clad legs sticking out from under the Jeep Wrangler parked next to Uncle Sid's house. Legs that belonged to Matt, Uncle Sid's son and older brother to spoiled brat, Tiffany.

How can one kid—Tiffany—be so annoying and the other—Matt—so totally hot? I tried to avoid Matt because of the way I got when I'm around him. Though I'm normally loquacious (last Wednesday's vocabulary word that I copied and vowed to use at least three times,) one look at Matt and I lost my power of speech. My jaw dropped and my mouth went dry. There's just something about him—sleepy blue eyes, light brown hair that usually needs combing, a crooked grin and a sculpted, rock-hard body.

It wasn't some creepy, incestuous thing since Matt and I weren't real cousins. Sid was Faye's step brother. Nope, we didn't have the same blood coursing through our veins. Matt's was probably blue, while mine came from the mystery man Faye refused to talk about.

I tiptoed past the Jeep to spare myself further humiliation. I'd almost made it when he rolled out on one of those sled things and grabbed my ankle. "Hey, kid, how ya doin'?"

The warmth of his hand against my bare skin turned my normally frisky brain cells to mush. Sure enough, my lower jaw was heading south. "Uh, just great, Matt," I said, averting my eyes and licking my suddenly parched lips.

He released my ankle and stood up. "Good," he said. "Your mom still got that . . . whaddaya call it?"

"Fibromyalgia." As I said the word, I felt my upper lip curl in a sneer. "So she says."

"She getting better?"

"She's trying to get social security benefits, you know, the one for disability."

The words tasted bitter in my mouth.

"Oh yeah," Matt said. "I saw Big Ed's car here the other night. He's her lawyer, right?"

My hands automatically curled into fists. I narrowed my eyes and studied Matt's face, looking for a smirk or maybe a suggestive wink. Even though I didn't want to punch him, I could and I would. I knew how to punch. Faye had made sure.

No problem. He'd moved on. Wonder of wonders, he was looking at me. I mean, really looking at me with those sexy blue eyes. His gaze lingered for a long moment on my chest. Whoa! Was he checking out my 'cots? I was suddenly aware I'd outgrown my shorts and tee shirt. Not knowing what else to do, I shoved my hands into the pocket of my cut-offs and took a step back.

"Well, hey, I gotta go check the mail. See ya, Matt."

His voice followed me as I headed down the driveway. "Hey, kid. If you ever need a ride somewhere, let me know. I got the Jeep running real good."

Because my mouth had fallen open once again, I settled for a casual wave of acknowledgement even though I wanted to pump a fist in the air and scream, "YES!"

As I trotted to the mailbox, the late April sunlight warm on my shoulders, I pondered this strange turn of events. Even though he called me "kid," clearly Matt had noticed a couple of new bulges on my formerly stick-like body. Hmmm. Had my tumble off the ladder, followed by the electric fence zapping, released some sort of male-attracting hormone?

In spite of my mini-triumph, Matt-wise, a dull headache began to throb painfully at the back of my skull. I opened the mailbox and, as predicted, Faye's check had not arrived. There was, however, a familiar tan envelope from the Social Security Office of Adjudication and Review. Probably another form for Faye to fill out asking questions like, "Are you able to push a grocery cart?" And, "Can you walk up a flight of stairs?" Questions Faye had already answered "No" and "No."

When I handed her the envelope, Faye sighed and dropped it, unopened, onto the pile of similar tan envelopes stacked between the bed and wall.

"Big Ed's coming tomorrow. I'll let him deal with it." She looked pointedly at her watch.

I took the hint. It was time for Fay's nightly ritual, two slices of peanut butter toast and two cans of Busch Light. The menu varied only on Thursday night. Big Ed night. He always brought burgers, fries and a fifth of Stoli. Not that I'm around on Thursdays. No way. But, when I come home on Friday, the place smells of grease and vodka.

Let me make this crystal clear. Big Ed was Faye's lawyer, not her boyfriend. That was what Faye said. He'd been working day and night on her case for two years. That was what Big Ed said. Me? I had my doubts.

Later that night, I heard the sound of Faye's rhythmic breathing and tiptoed back to the bedroom. I gathered up the empties and the plate littered with peanut butter-smearred crusts and tossed them in the garbage.

Tomorrow was Thursday, Big Ed night. I'd be staying with Kizzy Lovell, the town witch. That was what a lot of kids called her. Since I wouldn't be home until Friday, I made sure I had clean underwear in my backpack.

As the evening wore on, my headache grew steadily worse. At ten, I turned out the light. I pulled the curtains back so I could see the night sky, a brilliant canopy of far-flung stars and a full-faced moon. I held my hand up to the window. Bathed in moonlight, my palm looked washed in silver, its tell-tale lines carved in dark relief by the unknown maker of my fate. I thought about the times Kizzy studied the lines on my palm and said, "You're a special girl, Alfrieda. Like it or not, you have the Gift."

Every time I'd say, "What gift?" Kizzy would smile mysteriously and say, "You'll see," which really irritated me because, clearly, the only gift I had was the ability to get all-A's on my report card. Even that wasn't a gift, since I hated Algebra and had to work my butt off.

I had no sooner wrapped up in my faded pink quilt and snuggled into the couch bed when I remembered the aspirin and glass of water I'd placed by the bathroom sink before I brushed my teeth. I groaned and switched on the light. The bathroom was only a few steps away. But in my present state—cotton-mouthed and head pounding with pain—the distance seemed as vast as the Sahara Desert. I swung my feet to the floor and turned my head slowly toward the bathroom. I could see the glass of water perched on the counter like it was taunting me, "Come and get me, Allie."

I reached out a hand, thinking, *It would be a whole lot easier if you came to me*, and it happened again. The whole dark-around-the-edges, tunnel-vision, buzzing-in-the-head thing. The glass teetered back and forth, danced a little jig across the counter and shot into the air for a moment before it slammed onto the floor and shattered into about a jillion pieces.

"What the hell's going on, Allie?"

I looked up to see my mother standing in the narrow hallway. My hand, still extended toward the glass that wasn't there, shook violently. "I dropped it. That's all," I said. "Go back to bed. I'll clean it up."

Faye's eyes narrowed in suspicion but finally, she turned and trudged back to the bedroom. When I opened the door and stepped outside to fetch the broom, I was greeted by a symphony of night music. Strangely, the pain in my head was gone. The soft spring air was alive with a chorus of crickets backed by a full orchestra of spring peepers, their mating songs accompanied by the tinkle of wind chimes.

But, hold on. We didn't have wind chimes. We'd never had wind chimes. I walked to the back of the trailer and stared up at the gnarled old apple tree next to Blaster's pasture. Nudged by a gentle breeze, long silver tubes bumped together, creating a melody with subtle variations as the air around them ebbed and flowed. It was stabilized by a dangling iridescent glass ball whose surface caught and held the moonlight.

Must be some prank of Matt's. Vowing I'd figure it out in the morning, I grabbed the broom, opened the door and froze. A woman sat on my couch bed. A woman with flowers in her long, dark hair, wearing a pink-and-yellow, tie-dye dress embellished with a blazing purple sun. A woman, smoking what looked and smelled like weed. I

opened my mouth, preparing to scream so loudly and shrilly the shards of glass on the floor would shatter into even smaller pieces.

The woman said, “Hi. I’m Trilby, your spirit guide. Guess what? You just passed your first test. Isn’t that groovy?”

Try Me

Chapter Two

I stepped inside and whisper-screamed, “Are you nuts?” while fanning the air and glancing back toward Faye’s bedroom. Thank God, the door was closed. “Out!” I said. “I don’t care who you are. Get out!”

All I could think was, *Grounded for Life*. Trust me, it’s no picnic being grounded in a twenty-four-foot trailer.

Trilby giggled. “Oh, you’re worried about Mom. It’s okay. She can’t hear me.” One of her fingers shot up. “Or see me.” A second finger joined the first. She got through “smell” and “taste” then stopped, looking puzzled. “I know there’re five senses but I’ll be damned if I can remember the last one.”

“Who cares?” I jerked my thumb toward the door. “Outside,” I ordered. My voice was shrill with panic.

“Allie,” my mother called. “Who are you talking to?”

My heart leaped into my throat then settled in my chest, banging so loudly I was sure Faye would hear it and ask who was playing the drums. I flapped my hands at Trilby, frantic to be rid of her. She blew out air in disgust and rolled her eyes but rose from the couch and, in a blur of color and a blast of frigid air, disappeared.

“Nobody’s here, Faye,” I said. “I have to memorize something for school. I’ll go outside.” I backed out the door reciting, “We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union . . .”

“Cool, huh?” Trilby said from directly behind me.

I whirled around. “This isn’t happening! I’m sound asleep in the middle of some stupid dream.”

But then Trilby fluttered her fingers in my face—and I do mean *inside my face*—and said, “Neato. I didn’t know I could do that.” She passed her hands through my body. “Wooooo! Are you scared?”

I jumped back, trying to wrap my mind around the fact I wasn’t dealing with a flesh-and-blood woman, a living, breathing human being, but an apparition, a spook, a wraith. Swear to God, Trilby was a ghost! Not a particularly scary ghost, but most definitely a ghost.

I said the first thing that popped into my mind. “Scared? I don’t think so! Look at you! Your lipstick is on crooked, your eyes are bloodshot, you’re higher than a kite. And that ‘wooooo’ thing? It went out about a hundred years ago.”

“That’s just mean,” Trilby said, pouting. She plopped down in a lawn chair. “I’m trying to help you and you’re messing with my groove.”

I sat in the other chair and pointed at the wind chimes. “Yours?”

“Yeah, my signature touch. Nice, huh?”

I sucked in a shaky breath. “This is probably a dream, but why are you here? What do you mean, I passed the first test?”

Trilby straightened her shell-and-bead necklace then touched the peace sign painted on her wooden bracelet. She leaned toward me and narrowed her eyes. “You’re my ticket out of a bad scene. If we do this right, I get to go up there.”

She pointed at the sky.

I sniffed in disapproval. “Smoking weed can’t help.”

“Listen, little girl. I’ve been stuck in the SeaTac airport since 1971. Talk about hell!”

My mind swam with confusion. “SeaTac?”

“Yeah. Some of us aren’t quite ready for the big crash pad in the sky. So we get to hang out at Concourse A, watch the planes take off, sleep on the floor, drink coffee and wait for ‘the call.’ You’re it. So, cooperate, okay?”

“Focus, Trilby. What test did I pass?”

“*At journey’s end I lie close to her heart, the maid who is strong of mind,*” she quoted. “You know, as per the prophecy. That one.”

Trilby had to be in the middle of some sort of drug-induced hallucination. I wasn’t sure how to deal with her but then, I reasoned, she *was* a ghost, so maybe this was typical ghostly behavior. I needed more information. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Hmmm,” she said, rolling her eyes heavenward. “I’m trying to remember my instructions. Today’s the thirtieth. Right?”

“No,” I said. “It’s the twenty-ninth. At least for another hour.”

“Oh, damn, my timing sucks! You don’t have it yet,” Trilby said. “I blew it.”

Her lower lip quivered and she blinked hard to hold back tears.

Chagrined, I thought about poor Trilby, trapped forever in SeaTac Airport, Concourse A. I’d never been there but it didn’t sound much like paradise.

“Okay, so it’s the wrong day,” I said. “Maybe that’s not so bad.”

She brightened. “Do you really think so?”

“Tell me everything you remember about your instructions, starting with this thing I’m supposed to have.”

Trilby started to answer then pinched her lips together and shook her head. “No,” she said. “If you don’t have it, that part will have to wait.”

“Have what?”

She fiddled with her beads. “I said, IT WILL HAVE TO WAIT!”

“Okay, okay.” I cast a nervous glance toward Faye’s window. “You don’t have to shout. Just tell me what you can.”

“You have the sign on your palm, right?”

I thrust out a hand, palm up, and turned it toward Uncle Sid’s yard light. She leaned toward me and traced a finger across my palm. Her feathery touch left a trail of light, and I gasped in surprise.

“Yep, you’ve got it.”

She touched the tiny red mark in the middle of my forehead. “And you had an unusual experience today.”

I told her about Blaster running backward and the flying glass.

“All right!” She pumped a fist in the air. “I’m not totally screwed. TKP. Telekinetic power. The ability to move things with your mind. You did it. You’re ‘the maid whose mind is strong.’ Oh, this is so groovy!”

I still didn’t understand. “What’s next?”

“Oh, it gets much better. See ya around, kid. I gotta get back.”

“Wait! Wait!” I said as she started to fade away. “Next time write the instructions down. That’s what Mrs. Burke makes us do in English class.”

Too late. Trilby was gone.

Try Me

Chapter Three

The next morning I stood out by the road with Mercedes and Manny Trujillo, waiting for the school bus and thinking about Trilby and wondering if I'd dreamed her. The wind chimes were gone. I checked. Maybe she took them with her to wherever . . . SeaTac airport if you can believe a ghost. Or, maybe it didn't happen at all.

I almost told Manny and Mercedes about the night. But they believed in things like vampires, werewolves and wendigos, whatever those were. Manny and Mercedes thought that stuff came from the devil. I was afraid they'd think the devil had paid me a visit, and they'd stop hanging out with me. I didn't have *that* many friends.

I had to talk to Kizzy and find out what the heck was happening to me. Was this the Gift she kept talking about? And, more importantly, could I get rid of it? Maybe there's an exchange counter where a person can go to return special gifts, like I returned the hideous pea-green stocking cap Aunt Sandra gave me for Christmas.

Before I could get answers to my questions, I was faced with a more pressing problem. Namely, protecting Mercedes and Manny from our arch enemy, Cory Philpott. The Trujillos lived on Uncle Sid's property. Their mother, Juanita, cleaned Aunt Sandra's house and Pedro, their dad, ran the Mexican crews that did all the hard work in the orchard.

Manny and Mercedes were way too nice. With seven kids and two parents sharing a three-bedroom house, it seemed like they'd know how to defend themselves. They didn't. Apparently that was my job. Cory Philpott lived to torment Manny and Mercedes.

At exactly 7:45, the bus rolled to a stop and the doors opened with a groan and hiss. We formed a single-file line. It was always the same. First me, then Mercedes, then Manny.

Patti, our vertically-challenged bus driver, used a booster cushion, had big hair, dagger-like fingernails, and a deep, raspy voice due to the pack of unfiltered Camels tucked in her shirt pocket. She greeted us as she always did, with high fives and our special name.

"Hey, Gorgeous Green-eyed Girl," she said to me. (Sometimes just "G.")

"Sweet Cheeks!" she exclaimed as Mercedes plodded up the steps.

"There's my Stud Muffin," she said to Manny, whose moon face split in a broad grin.

We made our way down the aisle as Patti ground the gears and lurched out onto the road. As usual, the only seats left were next to Cory Philpott, whose evil, troll face brightened as we approached. I gave him a squinty-eyed glare as Mercedes slipped into her spot next to the window.

He looked away from me and hissed at Manny, “Hey, beaner boy. Your backpack full of tacos? Do you share with your big-ass beaner sister?”

Okay, here’s the deal. I was fed up with Cory’s bullying. More importantly, I had a plan. Last fall, our science teacher trapped a black widow spider in a fruit jar. He passed the jar up and down the rows so we could get a good look at its shiny black body, long, long legs and the red hour glass on its belly. When I turned around to hand the jar to Cory, he levitated about a foot in the air. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead, and his hands were shaking. He may have even wet his pants. I didn’t check, for obvious reasons.

What good is secret information if you don’t use it? The time had come. I rose in my seat, my eyes wide with horror as I gazed at the top of Cory’s head. “Oh, my God! That’s the biggest black widow spider I’ve ever seen. Cory! *It’s in your hair!*”

Ashen-faced, Cory screamed like a little girl and scrambled into the aisle, jumping up and down and clawing at his hair with both hands. “Is it gone? Is it gone?” he yelled.

After a brief flurry of excitement—most of the kids were still half asleep—somebody from the rear of the bus spoke up. “Come on, dude, she’s playin’ ya. There’s no spider.”

Patti glanced over her shoulder. “This isn’t even black widow season. Get your ass in the seat!”

Hoots of laughter echoed through the bus. Cory collapsed back into his seat then turned to glare at me. He’d pretty much stopped harassing me after I punched him in the face the past January, when he said something gross about Faye and Big Ed.

Mercedes leaned close and murmured, “Cool. I told you he was into you.”

She thought Cory had a secret crush on me, that the purpose of his bullying was to get my attention. Mercedes was a total drama queen who saw unrequited love in the strangest of circumstances. She taped every episode of *General Hospital* and watched them on Saturdays.

“As if,” I said in Mercedes-speak.

The bus pulled up in front of our pathetic excuse for a high school. John J. Peacock H.S. had exactly eighty-seven students in four grades. The Peacock school district was like a rich family’s poor relative—sorta like Faye and me—jammed between two prosperous districts to the north and south.

All the rich kids who lived in Peacock Heights, located on the hills above Peacock Flats, went to Hilltop Christian School. They wore WWJD buttons—What Would Jesus Do—and the teenagers got blitzed every weekend. I don’t think Jesus was a big party guy, but then again, he did turn water into wine. Even though Matt and Tiffany lived in the flats, they went to Hilltop. Aunt Sandra wouldn’t allow them to go to public school.

After Patti's usual send-off—"You blockheads behave. See ya later, taters—" we poured out of the bus and into the old brick building, down a narrow hallway and through the ancient cafeteria, whose support beams were wrapped in thick insulation to keep the asbestos from seeping out. At least that's what our principal, Mr. Hostetler told us.

I had the perfect opportunity in English class to test out my new super powers. I sat at a perfectly level table with the perfect cylinder, a number two pencil. Could I make it roll horizontally across the desk? I glanced around to make sure nobody was watching before I tried. And tried. And tried. Couldn't do it. All right! Goodbye, super powers. Or maybe my mind was too cluttered with Mrs. Burke's multi-cultural lesson of the week.

Mrs. Burke was big on us learning about other cultures. Each week, we had a foreign phrase to use. This week it was French.

"When I call your name," she announced on Monday, "you will respond by saying, *C'est moi, Madame Burke*," which she told us meant, "It is me."

Sometimes she had to call roll three or four times before everyone cooperated. Today was no exception. Cory Philpott, still surly from our encounter on the bus, kept mumbling, "This is bullshit," under his breath and refused to answer.

Finally, Junior Martinez, who's two years older than the rest of us due to his unfortunate incarceration for carving up a rival gang member, turned around and told Cory, "Say it, you little piss pot."

He did.

A lot of the girls at Peacock H.S. had the hots for Junior. He had smooth, olive skin, a deep dimple in his right cheek, and he drove a low rider to school. Rumor had it he was trying to nail every girl in the freshman class and he was right on schedule. Except for me, of course. Faye may not be Mother of the Year, but she told me everything I needed to know about sex. Sometimes more than I wanted to know. Manny saw Junior pushing a kid in a stroller, so apparently he's already reproduced. Extremely uncool.

After I punched Cory—and got kicked out of school for a week—Junior started calling me "Home Girl" and "One Punch." Not that I would ever be part of a gang but it doesn't hurt to have Junior on your side. Mercedes, of course, saw it differently.

"Ohmigod!" she exclaimed. "Junior totally likes you."

After school I stayed on the bus when Manny and Mercedes got off. When Patti stopped in front of Kizzy's house, Cory just had to get in one last shot.

"Oooo, you're staying with the witch tonight. You gonna boil up a couple of little kids?"

I slung my back pack over one shoulder and started down the steps before I answered, "Nope, but we sure could use a big old hunk of white meat. Want to stop over later?"

“Good one, G,” Patti said. “That boy never learns.”

“Pick me up here tomorrow, okay?”

“Damn straight,” she said with a jaunty wave.

The doors slid shut and the big tires spit gravel as Patti tromped on the gas pedal.

As I approached Kizzy’s house, I felt my heart beat a little faster. The house could barely be seen from the road. It was hidden behind a humungous hedge that ran all the way around her property. The only way to get in was through the iron gate set in middle of the hedge. I never approached the gate straight on. I cut over to the hedge and sneaked up on it because of the eye. The gate had this spooky eye painted on it. Swear to God, no matter how hard I tried to avoid the eye, it watched me, its glaring black pupil tracking my every move. A falcon’s eye, Kizzy told me. A symbol used to ward off evil.

In spite of what Cory said, Kizzy was not a witch. She was a Romany gypsy, and apparently there was a difference. Who knew?

With an involuntary shiver, I averted my gaze from the eye, slipped through the gate and trotted down the walk toward the hulking, two-story house. The porch, with its overhanging roof, wrapped all the way around both sides of the house. A *veranda*, Kizzy called it.

“Alfrieda, you’re here!”

Kizzy stood at the top of the stairs and held out her arms. She was the only person who called me by my hideous real name. Thanks to Claude, Faye’s dad, I was given the name Alfrieda Carlotta Emerson. Faye ran away from home at seventeen. A year later, stuck in the hospital with a baby she didn’t want (me) and no visible means of support, she struck a deal with Claude. In exchange for paying the hospital bill, he got to name me after his beloved, long-dead mother, Alfrieda Carlotta Emerson the First.

“Hey, Kizzy!” I slipped off my back pack and stepped into her embrace. She smelled of incense, lavender and Virginia Slims. Not that I’m a fashion expert but Kizzy always looked like she was dressed for a photo shoot in case a photographer from *Vogue* magazine was hanging around Peacock Flats.

Today, she wore a silk, turquoise dress the same color as her eyes. Her long, dark braid, sprinkled with gray, was draped over one shoulder. Three silver bangle bracelets encircled each wrist. Silver hoops hung from her ears. She’d replaced the rune stone she usually wore around her neck with a pale blue gemstone in an ornate silver setting. The stone was the size of a large marble. A shimmer of light danced on its surface. Strangely, I felt a strong need to reach out, touch it, hold it in my hand and stroke its glistening surface. I clasped my hands together tightly to resist the urge.

Kizzy studied my face then gently touched the mark in the middle of my forehead with a manicured fingernail. “Ah, I see the third eye has awakened. Come. Sit”

She led me to the porch swing.

Okay, sometimes Kizzy creeped me out. Wasn't it bad enough I lived in a travel trailer and wore clothes from a thrift shop? I mean, nothing screamed "Loser," like a third eye popping out in the middle of your forehead. I rolled my eyes in disgust.

"Should I start wearing bangs?"

Kizzy's tinkling laughter reassured me. "It's not a real eye, Alfrieda. The third eye is located deep within the brain. It's called 'the seat of the soul,' the link between the physical and spiritual worlds. Tell me what happened."

I took a deep breath and the words tumbled out. The only thing I held back was my visit from Trilby. When I told her about Blaster and the glass, I watched Kizzy's face carefully, looking for something negative, maybe a flicker of amusement or doubt. Instead, she clapped her hands in delight. Her clear, turquoise eyes danced with excitement.

"Oh, but that's wonderful! Don't you see?" Once again, she reached out and touched the tiny mark in the middle of my forehead. "You hit your head in the exact spot where the third eye is located. And the headache you had? The awakening of the third eye causes pressure at the base of the brain. It's all as it is supposed to be, darling girl."

Impulsively, she drew me in for another hug. Normally, I'm not into touchy-feely stuff, but as Kizzy stroked my hair and patted my back, I felt hot tears stinging my eyes. When there's nobody to talk to, things build up in your mind until you feel like your brain will explode. I mean, what do you do with all that stuff? It bounces around in your head and makes you crazy. In spite of the whole "third eye" thing, at least one person thought I was okay.

"What about the electric fence?" My voice came out muffled, since I was still pressed against the front of Kizzy's silk dress.

She released me and, without thought, I took hold of the gleaming stone that hung around her neck. It felt warm in my hand. "The jolt of electricity in combination with the bump on your head probably gave you a jump-start, so to speak."

I giggled and stroked the smooth blue stone.

She tapped a fingernail against her front tooth, something she did when she was deep in thought. "Hmm, yes, I'm sure of it. The telekinetic power—when you made the bull run backward—was a manifestation of the two phenomena working together. And the buzzing sound and tunnel vision? It's called an *aura*."

"But I can't do it anymore," I said. "I tried in English class. I couldn't even move a pencil." I added hastily, "Not that I want to."

"You weren't motivated," Kizzy said. "The power will return."

The sun slipped beneath the veranda's overhanging roof. I held the pendant to the light and gasped as sunlight sparkled and danced on its opalescent surface. "It's beautiful," I said. "What do you call it?"

“A moonstone,” Kizzy said. “It was my mother’s. Her name was Magda.” She leaned forward and looked deep into my eyes. “What do you see when you look at this house? When you see the way I live?”

Whoa, was there a right answer here? I loved Kizzy for the good person she was. But I was pretty sure her question wasn’t about that. I remembered my mother saying, “Look at that house! She has people to drive her around, cook for her, clean for her. Where do you get dough like that?”

“Well,” I said, clearing my throat and looking away. “You seem to be pretty rich.”

“Exactly!” Kizzy’s eyes filled with tears. She dug around in the pocket of her dress and pulled out a tissue. She dabbed at her eyes. “But my mother was the saddest person I’ve ever known. She said it was because of the moonstone.”

I dropped it like it was a burning ember. “Why?”

Kizzy shrugged. “She claimed she was being punished for misusing its power.”

Oh great, I thought, looking at the pendant. *More magic B.S.*

“She wanted more children, but my father died when I was four. It was just the two of us in that big house in Seattle, surrounded by riches my mother could not enjoy.”

“How did she misuse the moonstone?”

“She said she’d done something shameful, that she’d been greedy. She blamed herself for my father’s death. Somehow, in her mind, it was all connected. The moonstone, the money, her loneliness.”

“That’s all she told you?”

Kizzy nodded. “I didn’t know about the moonstone until Mother was dying. She told me to keep it safe until I met the right person.”

“But what about your daughter? What about Carmel?”

Kizzy and her husband had adopted Carmel as a baby. The only thing she’d told me was she and her daughter weren’t close and that Carmel hung out with a rough crowd. Kizzy always rolled her eyes and murmured, “Bad blood,” when I mentioned her daughter. Today was no exception.

“Not Carmel,” she said firmly. “She’s not the right person.”

“Right person for what?”

“Someone with the Gift. Someone pure of heart who would use it for good, not evil.”

“Oh,” I said. “Somebody like you.”

Kizzy took my hand. “No, my dear. I don’t have the Gift.” She looked at my palm, traced the arc that circled what Kizzy called “the lunar mound,” and ended below my little finger. “Mother had a line exactly like this, but you have something she didn’t.”

I rolled my eyes. Not this again. “Yeah, right,” I mumbled and tried to pull my hand away.

Kizzy tightened her grip and pointed at a tiny constellation of whorls and hatch marks in the center of my lunar mound. “Look,” she said. “A perfect star.”

I jerked my hand away. “Everybody has that.”

“No.”

Kizzy showed me her palm. No star. No line. I shook my head in denial, suddenly uncomfortable with the whole spooky business.

Kizzy slipped the moonstone pendant from around her neck. Once again, she took my hand and turned it palm up. I knew what was coming and felt powerless to stop it. I watched, hardly daring to breathe. She dropped the moonstone onto my palm, the glistening silver chain pooling around it. She gently closed my fingers.

“And now, it’s yours.”

Try Me

Try Me

Try Me