

THE DEAD, THE DAMNED, AND THE FORGOTTEN

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1

A body was waiting for me at the morgue.

That wasn't the type of message I was expecting to receive when I awoke at sunset, but there was no avoiding it. My voice mail contained a semi-polite message from Archibald Deacon, Savannah's coroner, informing me that a nightwalker had just been delivered to his morgue. The message was followed by one from homicide detective Daniel Crowley, also informing me of the waiting corpse. A final message was from the now frantic coroner, who wanted me to deal with the corpse immediately. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do until the sun had finally set beneath the horizon, allowing night to reclaim the world.

The private examination room was in the basement of the morgue, away from the main room that held the majority of the dead. It was one of the few buildings in Savannah with a basement, given the city's high water table, and it came at a great cost. Due to moments like these, I had been more than willing to make the contribution to the city.

The cinder-block walls had been covered with a thick coat of white paint that had begun to yellow with age. A handful of narrow windows lined the walls more than six feet above the floor. The glass had been painted black to deter any inquisitive people who happened to wander too close. A window-unit air conditioner sputtered and coughed randomly from its perch at the far end of the room, spewing forth a semi-steady stream of cool air.

I looked up from the coroner's report to watch Knox as he leaned over the body of the dead nightwalker. His lips were curled in disgust, revealing faint flashes of fang. The opposite wall from where I stood was covered with a stainless steel refrigeration unit for corpses. There were only four doors that opened to slide-out drawers. A larger unit was in the main examination room on the first floor.

"Are you sure there were no other wounds on the body besides the main two?" I inquired, turning my attention from the disgruntled nightwalker to the coroner, who hovered close by. Archibald was a short, round man who stood on stubby little legs. His dark brown hair was thinning, leaving the top of his skull nearly exposed. Archie, as I preferred to call him, had been the coroner for Savannah and the surrounding counties for nearly twenty years and we had known each other for almost as long.

"Mira," he snapped. His bushy grayish-brown brows bunched together over his large, bulbous nose. "Half the body was destroyed! How could I possibly answer such a question?"

"Can you at least tell me if the body was burned before or after he was beheaded?"

"After," replied a new voice.

Archibald jumped at the unexpected appearance of Detective Daniel Crowley, but I didn't flinch. I had sensed him walking through the building toward our location in the basement.

"How do you know?" I asked, looking over at Daniel as I closed the file folder that held a copy of the coroner's report. It was the real copy, one that would never be officially filed with the police department. Archibald would create a second version that would carefully omit any questionable details like the elongated canines, the sensitivity to sunlight, and any kind of genetic abnormalities he was already aware of.

"I talked to some of the guys who were first on the scene," Daniel continued, closing the door behind him. "When they found

the body, one of the officers opened some curtains to let light in and the body started being reduced to ash like a slow-burning ember.”

“They saw him burn?” Knox demanded in a harsh tone. Daniel took a hesitant step backward and looked over at me again. Knox and Daniel had never worked together. In fact, I was the only nightwalker in contact with Daniel and Archie, but it was time for that to change. If Knox was going to aid me with managing my domain, he needed to know the humans I was in contact with.

However, the corpse was unnerving Knox more than I had expected, and the nightwalker was losing some of the cool, unshakable logic that I had come to depend on him for. This unexpected rough edge couldn’t be seen by these trusted humans.

Nodding once to Daniel, I dropped the folder on a nearby desk and slipped my hands into the front pockets of my worn jeans. The relaxed stance helped to ease some of the tension from Daniel’s shoulders.

“It was weird, they said.” Daniel ran his fingers through his sweaty hair, causing large chunks to stand on end. “There was no fire, but they said it was like the body was burning. No one commented that it was the sunlight. They thought the killer might have doused the body with a chemical in an effort to destroy the evidence.”

“I’ve got a couple things I can put in the report that could potentially work as an explanation,” Archie interjected.

“Write down the names of the cops,” Knox ordered. “We may need to adjust their memories.”

Again, Daniel looked at me, frowning. I nodded slightly, approving the request while inwardly I wished I could smack Knox on the back of the head.

Pushing off the wall, I pulled my hands out of my pockets and stretched my arms over my head, extending my entire body into a long, straight line. “Excellent. Anything else I should know?” I was still trying to fully wake up—I hadn’t expected to find myself at the morgue first thing in the evening, especially without even time to shower.

“The call came in at around nine A.M. Anonymous male caller from a prepaid cell phone,” Daniel replied.

“The killer?”

Daniel shrugged, acknowledging the possibility.

“That’s about three hours after sunrise,” Knox muttered in a low voice. He took a few steps away from the corpse, brushing his hands against his pants even though he had never actually touched the body. “Plenty of time to get in and get out after he was unconscious for the day.”

“We’re still trying to dig up which cell tower was used to see if the person was still in town at the time,” Daniel said. His frown deepened as he watched Knox start pacing between the stainless steel table and a wheeled cart loaded with different sharp instruments.

“Anything at the house?” I inquired, dragging the detective’s keen attention back to me.

“No, we didn’t find anything of interest.”

I watched Daniel from under the brim of my baseball cap. The fluorescent lights in the morgue tended to give my pale skin an inhuman pearlescent sheen. It was why both Knox and I were dressed in long-sleeve shirts and baseball caps despite the fact that it was still above eighty degrees outside.

“Knox and I will check it out tonight.”

“Do you know who did this?” Daniel asked. Sweat stains stretched from under his arms and lined his collar. His tie had been loosened and he looked oddly out of sorts without a cigarette in one hand. It was still early in his shift but it looked like he had already been through hell. He must have either come in early after hearing about the strange murder or hadn’t gone to bed yet from the previous night.

“I’ve got some guesses. We’ll take care of this. Get some rest.”

“Mira, I can’t just walk away. If there’s a murderer within the city, I need to track this bastard down and stop him before he kills someone else. That’s my job.”

A smile lifted my lips. Daniel didn’t see the half-burned remains as some bloodsucker that got what it deserved. He saw him as a person who had his life unjustly ended and believed that the rest of the population (humans, nightwalkers, and all the others) needed to be protected from the murderer. I was doubtful many humans would be so open-minded.

“I appreciate that, Daniel,” I said, stepping away from the wall to stand between the corpse and Archibald and Daniel. “And normally I would let you get your man, but this time it’s a nightwalker that’s been killed. You’re not equipped to handle this problem. Knox and I will handle it. We won’t allow the killer to endanger the citizens of Savannah.”

“What about the body? We can’t...People are going to want tests run and...” Archie started, turning my smile into a smug grin.

“I’ll sign the paperwork indicating that his sister dropped by and demanded that the body be cremated immediately for religious reasons. You will then declare that the tests are inaccurate due to a contaminated sample. The cause of death is obvious and we’ll identify and dispose of the body before we leave. Your jobs are nearly done, gentlemen.” The plans flowed forth easily, as if I did this every other night. But the fact was it was rare that I had to deal with the death of a nightwalker. Most of the time, it would turn out to be a lycanthrope or a warlock that was a very heavy magic user. As Keeper of this domain, I was the first and last line of defense for all the supernatural races when it came to protecting our secret.

Both men hesitated, but Daniel finally muttered something under his breath before walking out of the room, his hands shoved

into the pockets of his trousers. Archibald said nothing as he waddled over to the desk and pulled out the necessary forms. His white lab coat fluttered behind him, nearly dragging the ground. He marked X's where he needed me to fill out information and sign. Spreading the paperwork out on the desk, he left Knox and me to the corpse.

Now that we were alone, I pulled off the blue-tinted sunglasses I had been wearing and hooked them over the top button of my shirt. "That could have gone better." I wanted to snarl in frustration.

Knox paced away from the corpse, his arms crossed over his chest. "They're unnerved by what we are. It can't be helped."

"Bullshit. They were unnerved by your behavior. I've seen you easily sway anything with nice breasts and a tight ass. What happened here?"

"Maybe it's because those men lacked the aforementioned items," he commented dryly, making me want to throw something at his head.

"Well, you better learn to widen your scope because they're not going anywhere and we need their assistance. You need them and they'll be far more helpful if they're not worried about you grabbing a snack."

"If you want, I can go tweak their memories," he offered.

I waved my hand at him, stopping any movement toward the door. "No, don't go messing with their memories. You need their trust and you don't get that if you're mucking around in their brains."

"They'll never know."

"I'll know."

Knox nodded, removing his dark sunglasses so that I could look into his brown eyes. "I'll do better next time."

"Thank you," I murmured as I stepped up to the body. It was highly unusual for Knox to be so gruff and harsh when dealing with humans. His nature was very ingratiating, and his dark, handsome looks tended to win over the reluctant. His maker had the same manner. Because of his uncharacteristic behavior, I was beginning to worry that Knox had been well-acquainted with the victim.

Looking down at the steel tray, my eyes skimmed over the badly burned face. The skin was blackened and the eyes were now gone as if they had melted in their sockets, sending the fluid down in to the back of the skull. It looked like he might have had short-cut, brown hair. But the condition of the head wasn't the disturbing part. It was the fact that it was no longer attached to the body.

It was likely that that was the killing blow, but the murderer could have removed his heart first and then his head. The nightwalker's chest cavity had been ripped open and the heart cut out using some kind of serrated blade that had torn the edges of the flesh into ugly shreds. At least it was likely that the victim had felt no pain. It appeared that it all happened during the daylight hours, meaning that the vampire had been dead to the world.

"I'm assuming that you recognize who this is," I said, my own mood growing more sour and anxious as I continued to examine the corpse. I vaguely knew all the nightwalkers within my domain. There were more here than in most cities this size, but then I maintained a tight control over my domain. It afforded those that lived here more of a sense of security and peace than what many cities could offer.

However, during the past few years, I had begun to withdraw from my own kind, no longer wanting to be faced with them. I didn't want to hear their thoughts in the night, or feel their cool presence as I moved silently through the city searching for my next meal. Knox had taken over much of the night-to-night management. Of course, that simply required him making regular appearances at all the nightwalker hot spots.

"His name was Bryce." Knox leaned his back against the refrigeration unit, his arms crossed over his chest. His shoulders were stiff and his normally neutral expression was twisted into a frown.

With my hands braced on the table before me, I looked up at my companion. "What's your problem? Did you know him well?"

A faint shrug briefly lifted his narrow shoulders. "I knew him, but not well."

"Then what has got you so on edge?"

"He was executed," he hissed, waving one hand at the severed head. "His head was cut off and his heart removed. He was executed during the day when he was defenseless. How are you not unnerved by this?"

"He was possibly killed during the day," I corrected, trying to keep both of us calm and rational. "We won't know for sure until we check his house." The truth was that I *was* unnerved and more than a little concerned. If Bryce had been killed at night, it was highly likely that the murderer was another nightwalker. And then my only reason for tracking down the murderer would be punishment for allowing the humans to catch wind of it and threatening our secret. However, if Bryce had been killed during the day, we had a bigger problem. But we had to tackle one thing at a time, and a panicked Knox would do me no good.

"How old was he?" I demanded, attempting to refocus Knox's attention.

"Less than two centuries."

"How long has he been in my domain?"

"About a decade. Maybe a little more."

“Was he involved in anything recently that I should be aware of? Changes in allegiance? Was he a part of a family?”

Knox pushed away from the wall and stood, shoving one hand through his sandy blond hair. “I-I’m not sure.”

“Concentrate,” I murmured, looking over Bryce for any identifying marks. Some families were known for branding their members. We couldn’t be tattooed because we always healed, but we could retain some scars if we were low on blood and were unable to heal properly. The process was generally painful and ugly, but then most families were painful, ugly affairs. I didn’t find anything on Bryce, but I wasn’t surprised. Most of his body was either singed or blackened from its exposure to the sun.

“He’s a part of the Ravana family, I believe. He came to Savannah alone and immediately got sucked into Justin’s clan,” Knox replied. His voice grew steadier the longer he spoke, as if he were finally detaching himself from the gruesome death of the nightwalker that lay before him. Nightwalker flocks were like high school cliques, each with its own set of rules and bizarre tastes.

A low, steady hiss escaped me as I turned this new bit of information over in my brain. I had been hoping that he wasn’t a member of one of few families that existed within my domain, but of them all, Justin Ravana’s clan was the most undesirable. Cruel and vicious, Justin was one of the oldest within my territory and had been practically raised by the Coven. I hadn’t thought much of his petition to live in my domain decades ago, but I had regretted agreeing ever since. Justin specialized in brutality, torture, and control. No one that entered into his family ever escaped it alive.

“When Bryce was away from his family, he tended to associate mostly with fledglings,” Knox continued. “During the past few years, I’ve seen him mainly with this small group of nightwalkers, mostly females, all less than a century old.”

“Not exactly the best list of suspects you’ve got for me.” I stood, pulling away from my examination of the corpse. “A group of fledglings? It’s possible that it was Justin, but it’s not his style to hand off the murder to someone else who could do it during the day. He’d want to be part of it. Justin would have taken the time to handle it personally over a series of weeks if possible.”

“What? You’ve never seen a fledgling kill another nightwalker?” Knox scoffed. The comment finally caused some of the tension to roll off of his shoulders.

“I’ve seen the remains of plenty of fledgling kills, but I’ve never known of any fledgling that could accomplish the feat during the day. And I’ve never known a fledgling to kill a nightwalker in this style.”

“Really? Fledglings have a style? A preferred method of murder?” he mocked.

“Don’t we all?” I batted my eyes at him.

“We all know your preferred method, Fire Starter,” Knox said, shoving his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans. He leaned against the cooler, careful to keep his eyes on me and not on the corpse. “What about fledglings?”

“I guess I have something in common with them. Fire is their preferred method. It’s fast, effective, and relatively easy. Of course, I’ve seen just as many fledglings go up in flames with their intended victim because they weren’t careful.”

“So you’re saying one of the fledglings that knew Bryce didn’t kill him,” he suggested, earning him a grin.

“I didn’t say that. It’s possible, but unlikely, particularly if he was killed during the day.” I wasn’t willing to say out loud who I thought had killed Bryce—we were both on edge enough.

An easy silence settled between us as I contemplated our dead friend and his potential attacker. Knox stood nearby, ready to offer up information. He was careful to look anywhere but at the half-burned, beheaded corpse. “Did you ever do this with my maker?” Knox softly asked, fiddling with his sunglasses.

“What? Look at corpses with Valerio?” I asked, my brow furrowed at the unexpected question. “All the time. It was how we spent most of our nights.”

“Ha. Ha,” he said, rolling his eyes at my sarcasm. “I can imagine how you spent most of your nights. But you know what I mean. He said you and he investigated strange things for the Coven back when you were in Europe?”

A smile drifted across my lips before I could stop it. I had too many good memories of Valerio, but that didn’t mean I was willing to share. Some were too embarrassing or too gruesome. And others were simply too private. My time with Valerio wasn’t always filled with happy memories and I was frequently horrified by some of the things we did, but I would never trade the moments I had with Knox’s maker.

“Yes, Valerio and I frequently looked into a strange death or a corpse that needed our unique attention to keep the secret protected. During that time, we never found a fledgling that could kill during the day.” I smiled at my companion for lightening the mood and shook my head. How had Valerio ever stood to part with this child? I was becoming far too attached to him.

“Is there anything else I should know about our dead friend?” I asked, resting my hands on the edge of the stainless steel table next to Bryce.

“The only other thing I can think of is that about six months ago he petitioned you to allow him to bring over his lover,” Knox added.

My head snapped up at this bit of information. “I’m assuming that I said no.”

“You denied the request,” Knox confirmed. His brow furrowed slightly as he turned over my sudden interest. “You think she had something to do with this?”

“I’m hoping such a thing is impossible since her memory was wiped,” I said in a hard, cold voice.

“It was.”

“Did our headless friend tell you that or did you check for yourself?”

"I checked. There were no memories of Bryce or nightwalkers in her brain," he replied.

Biting down on my lower lip, I stared down at the blackened remains of Bryce, still wondering if his would-be fledgling had found a way to murder him because he had refused to make her into a nightwalker. Though equally unlikely, there were still a number of ways she might have been involved in Bryce's death.

"Is she a magic user?"

"The woman?" Knox's perpetually even, dry tone jumped several octaves. "I don't think so."

"If she is, she may have been able to hide her memories from you."

Knox's whole body stiffened at my comment while his expression went completely blank. "Do you honestly think Valerio didn't show me how to pick apart the mind of a magic user?" he demanded in a brittle voice.

A ghost of a smile flitted across my face at Valerio's name on his tongue. "Would it have occurred to you that she might be?" I countered, but quickly waved my hand at him. "I don't doubt your ability and I think it's highly unlikely the woman is a magic user. However, I find it strange that six months ago he was denied the right to make a vampire and now he's dead using a very human form of execution."

"Could have been a nightwalker," Knox suggested, putting his sunglasses back on again.

"Maybe," I whispered. Had Justin not approved of Bryce's request to create a fledgling and decided to act against the nightwalker in some fashion? The time issue still needed to be confirmed. "We won't know until we get to Bryce's place."

"We?"

"Of course! You think I would leave you out of the fun of ransacking a murdered vampire's lair for clues as to his killer? Not a chance." My outrageous teasing left a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Besides, there will be plenty of time for you to track down the woman and anyone known to associate with Bryce," I continued, crushing the smile before it could actually form.

"You're too kind, Mira," Knox sneered. He took a step backward as I placed Bryce's head on his stomach. I then picked up the dead nightwalker and carried him over to the oven. Setting the nightwalker inside, I closed the door and summoned up my powers. Within seconds, the body was consumed with flames hotter than any that could be produced by the crematorium. The remains were reduced to ash. Bryce was no more.

As I looked up at Knox, a cold grin stretched across my lips. "You have no idea how *kind* I can be." I was the Fire Starter, scourge of our people. The protector of our secret. Kindness was all relative.

2

A crunch of gravel was my only warning as we walked across the parking lot of the morgue to my car. I hadn't scanned the area for other nightwalkers. This was my domain, and no one would dare to attack me in my own domain. I was wrong. Pain exploded in my ribs just before my body slammed into the side panel of a dark blue station wagon, denting the metal and breaking two of my ribs. With a snarl, my head snapped up to see who attacked me. Knox was squared off against a dark-haired nightwalker in leather pants and a black T-shirt. Other than his porcelain white skin, he looked as if he was a part of the night itself.

"Stand down, Knox," I ordered, pushing back to my feet. My body protested the movement as my ribs attempted to mend.

"Mira?" Knox paused in his circling of the other nightwalker, but his brown eyes still glowed; he was ready to attack if I said the word.

"This is my fight," I stated, taking a step toward the nightwalker. "It's been a long time, Bishop. I don't remember inviting you into my domain."

The nightwalker smiled, but had yet to take his gaze off Knox. Bishop was nearly five centuries old and a very skilled fighter, making him one of the most valued servants of Macaire. The Coven Elder wouldn't dispatch Bishop without a very good reason.

"As an emissary of Macaire, I go where I wish," he announced. He sidestepped to his left so that he could look at both me and Knox at the same time. Unfortunately, Knox still stood between us. Bishop might be here on business with me, but he would have no qualms over ripping through Knox just for the fun of it.

"Knox, go inside and see if there is anything else that Archie needs to complete his paperwork," I commanded, but Knox

didn't move. If anything, he seemed to sidle slightly in front of me.

"Not a chance. I'm not leaving you out here alone with this guy," Knox said.

"No wonder I'm here. Your people won't even listen to you," Bishop mocked, straightening from his defensive stance.

"Go, Knox. I know him. We have some business to settle," I said, pushing the words past clenched teeth. Normally, Knox's loyalty and readiness to protect me at all times would be flattering, but not now, not in front of a member of the Coven's court.

Knox hesitated a moment before finally edging around Bishop and heading back into the morgue where he would make sure that no one came out to the parking lot while Bishop and I discussed whatever business had brought him into my domain.

We both waited until we heard the door to the morgue slam shut before we were in motion. My nails raked across his chest, tearing his shirt and leaving four ragged cuts across his skin. He backhanded me, throwing me into the side of another car. Pain spread across my face, leaving me with the feeling that he had broken my cheekbone. With a growl, I pushed away from the car and launched myself at him. Ducking his swinging fists, I landed a punch to his gut that broke a rib or two before he managed to grab my throat with his right hand. He squeezed, effectively closing off my airway. I didn't need to breathe, but from this position he could quickly rip my head off, ending this contest.

I grinned at him, my eyes glowing an eerie shade of purple as in nightshade. Around us, a circle of fire sprang up from the ground, closing in so that there was barely a foot of open space between us and the crackling flames.

Bishop pulled me close to him so that the tip of my nose touched his. There was no escaping his hard, black gaze. There was no light, no glow of power, just a black empty pit as if his power were bottomless. "Do it, Mira!" Bishop whispered. "Incinerate me. I swear you'll awaken tomorrow night back in the hands of the Coven in Venice, and this time Jabari will not be there to save you."

A shiver ran through me at his cold words. The Coven was the ruling body of the nightwalker nation, and it was an ugly place of pain and nightmares. It was a place I had escaped centuries ago and rarely visited, particularly since Jabari, one of the four Elders, had gone missing.

Bishop's grip on my throat loosened slightly so I could talk. "What do you want?" I asked in a ragged whisper.

"Besides the opportunity to rip your head off?" he asked with a dark grin that revealed his perfect white fangs. "I'm here to make sure that you clean up the mess that is currently your domain."

"What mess?" I demanded. I reached up and dug my nails into his large hand, trying to get him to release my throat.

"You're joking, right?" he said, dropping me. "We've heard from people within your domain. There is no order here."

"That's a lie."

"There has been an increase in Daylight Coalition-related deaths within the New World, recently," he continued to list.

"It's not my job to police all of the New World," I quickly countered.

"And now you have a fresh death found by the humans. From what I've heard, it looks like another Coalition kill. Can you not even protect your own?"

"I'm looking into the matter," I growled. I had nothing that I could say about Bryce's death. I didn't know the why behind it all just yet, but I would with time.

"I'm here to make sure that you clean up this mess and deal with the nightwalkers within your domain," Bishop said, taking a step closer to me as I stepped backward. With a thought, the flames were gone and the parking lot was plunged back into darkness.

"Other than the matter with the fresh body, there's no mess here."

"The Coven doesn't believe that to be true."

"You mean Macaire doesn't believe it. Who's been talking to him?"

"Now that would be telling," he said, a fresh grin lifting his thin lips. "Convince me that you have everything under control here, and I will leave along with everyone else that I brought with me. Fail and you'll be coming back to Venice with me."

A fresh stab of fear shot through me, seeming to pierce down to the bone, and it was nearly a minute before I could speak again. "What do you want me to do?" I found myself asking in a shaky voice. I wouldn't go back to the Coven. I couldn't. The place was a nightmare of death and endless screams that echoed through your brain even in your sleep.

"Catch the killer. Settle the chaos within your domain," he said, making it sound so simple. And for him, it was. He was simply waiting around for an excuse to drag me back to Venice. That was his job.

"Fine," I reluctantly agreed. "Just stay out of my way. This is still my domain and I will handle this *mess*."

"As you wish," he said with a slight bow of his head. With a parting grin, mocking me one last time, Bishop strolled out of the parking lot, heading back for the main street.

I sat down on the ground against one of the cars I had crashed into earlier. Resting my elbows on my bent knees, I dropped my head into my hands. *Damn it*. A flunky of the Coven was dangling a sword just above my neck, simply waiting for an excuse to chop my head off. My hands were trembling and my stomach was twisting into knots as I sat there, mentally listing every nightwalker I knew of within my territory. Who could it be that was talking to the Coven? Someone was betraying me, betraying my trust and my protection.

Knox...I called out mentally for my companion. Less than a minute later he was kneeling at my side.

He rested his hand on the back of my head while the other was on my knee. “What happened? Are you all right? Who was that?”

“Someone from the Coven. We’re being watched. We need to clean up this mess quickly before it becomes an even bigger problem.”

“How did they find out so fast about Bryce? He was killed this morning.”

“I don’t think Bishop is here because of Bryce. I think the timing just ended up being convenient for whoever has the Coven’s ear,” I said, lifting my head so that I could look at Knox. “We need to get going. We’re officially running short on time.”

3

According to Daniel’s information, Bryce was found in a house out past Bonaventure Cemetery, not far from Wilmington Island. Knox and I jumped into my little silver BMW Z4 and zipped out of the city like a mercury tear sliding down a clown’s cheek. The convertible top was down and we shoved our baseball caps in the center console area between our seats so we could enjoy the feel of the warm summer air rubbing against our faces and tangling our hair. The night was alive, pulsing and squirming, demanding to be noticed.

Yet it wasn’t the fact that Bryce had been murdered that had us both unnerved. It was the fact that someone had contacted the police regarding the corpse, potentially looking to expose us. It was the fact that the body had been found in the middle of the living room. No nightwalker was stupid enough to sleep out in the open, even when in the safety of his own lair. It was the way Bryce had been killed—by the old mythological methods, head and heart removed.

The whole thing stank of the Daylight Coalition and yet I felt confident that no branch members resided within my domain. The Daylight Coalition was an all-human organization that believed in the existence of vampires and other supernatural creatures. They saw it as their duty to hunt us all down. Their aim wasn’t too good, however, considering they had killed as many humans as they had nightwalkers. The rest of the human world thought they were a bunch of crackpots who had watched *Van Helsing* one too many times. I tended to agree.

I downshifted the car into second as I turned onto Bryce’s street. The houses were spaced relatively far apart, with large yards filled with massive honeysuckle bushes and white jasmine. The air was thick with the rich scent of flowers and damp earth. Across the street from the two-story, redbrick house, I parked the car and turned off the engine. Using my powers, I briefly scanned the region. There were only a few nightwalkers in the area, and one of them was Bishop. I suspected he was going to be my shadow until this little investigation was finally concluded.

Another was standing just at the end of the block. Her name was Heather, and she was also a member of the Ravana family. Word traveled fast among telepaths. Without my needing to say a word, most of the city nightwalkers knew that a vampire had been murdered. In general, they were willing to give me a wide berth so I could investigate the matter, but I had been expecting someone from the Ravana family. Bryce’s death was their business.

I hesitated, my right hand still clutching the key in the ignition. Something felt off. We sat in the car, waiting for the brunette to finally reach us. She stood in the street a few feet away from where I sat in the car. She looked lost and afraid, with her right hand gripping her left elbow.

“Do you know if he had anyone else staying with him in the house?” I asked.

“No one on a permanent basis,” she said shaking her head, sending her long brown hair down around her face. “I think he had nightwalkers that stayed for brief periods of time here and there, but nothing permanent.”

I was willing to guess that Bryce was one of the few within the Ravana family that was permitted to keep a residence outside the main family home. Justin believed in spreading out his clan throughout the city so that his influence could be felt everywhere. Older, trusted members were allowed their own homes as long as they checked in on a regular basis. This wasn’t an original idea within the nightwalker world, just rare.

I listened into the thoughts of all the humans with a one-block radius, but they were all consumed with their own problems—bills, sickness, doubt. No one was thinking of the body that was taken out of the lonely redbrick house. Even all the lycanthropes

had left this section of the city. I had a feeling I had Barrett Rainer, Alpha of the Savannah Pack, to thank for the extra space.

Sitting in the car for another minute, we all stared across the street at the dark house. The feeling of foreboding was irrational. I was unnerved by the way Bryce was killed and I was afraid of what I would find inside. We were all completely helpless during the daylight hours; unable to awaken, unable to defend ourselves. That was our greatest fear—to go to sleep one morning and not awaken the next night.

“Let’s get this done,” I announced gruffly, jerking the key from the ignition with a soft jingle. We both alighted from the tiny car and crossed the street in silence. There was only the sound of the wind rustling the leaves in the trees and a distant wind chime singing a forlorn melody. The air was still hot and heavy even after nightfall.

“Why would someone kill Bryce?” Heather softly asked, walking a couple steps behind me.

“*Who* and *why* are the questions we’re trying to answer,” I said a bit irritably. Stopping short, I spun around on my right heel to face the young fledgling. “Why did Justin send you here?”

“He...I...he said I was to help you in any way I could. Bryce was part of the family. Justin cares about us,” she replied in an almost mechanical manner.

I snorted and turned back toward the house. She had been sent to spy on me and report back to Justin.

“You go in through the back and search the second floor,” I said, looking over at Knox as we walked up the sidewalk and past a pair of stone urns overflowing with what appeared to be a fuchsia plant. “I’ll go in through the front door and search the first floor.”

“Anything in particular I’m looking for?”

I paused with my foot on the bottom step leading up to the front porch. The wooden board was warped from age and covered in peeling white paint that crunched under my running shoe. “We’re looking for any sign of a struggle. Also, look for Bryce’s daylight chamber. Was he taken out of there or did he actually fall asleep out in the open in the living room?”

Knox stared at me for a second, his blond brows bunched together over his nose. “You think the killer knew exactly where to find him?”

“Maybe. We won’t know until we get in there and look around.”

“What should I do?” Heather asked.

“Go with Knox. Help him, but stay out of his way.”

Heather quickly nodded, her arms wrapped around her middle as she moved to follow after the other nightwalker. I mounted the warped stairs to the front porch, watching Knox out of the corner of my eye as he circled around the porch and headed toward the back door. A mechanical whir caught my attention, drawing my gaze toward the ceiling above the door. The tiny red light on the remote video camera blinked once.

The world around me exploded. I flew backward through the air and bounced once before finally landing on my back in the yard. Bricks, chunks of flaming wood, and other bits of debris followed me, crashing to the ground and on top of me. My head throbbed and there was an annoying ringing in my ears. A hundred different pains radiated through my body. Groaning, I rolled over onto my side to find most of the house in the yard with me, while what remained on the foundation was engulfed in flames. So much for our investigation.

Reaching out with my powers, I searched for Knox. He was still alive, but his thoughts were consumed with terror. He was on fire. Pushing to my feet, I ran as fast as my protesting body would allow. My vision blurred as I ran around the side of the house, blood flowing into my left eye from a gash on my forehead.

I found Knox rolling on the ground, struggling to put out the fire on his right arm and on his pant legs. Panic overwhelmed him. With a wave of my hand, the fire immediately went out, but he continued to roll. Kneeling next to him, I grabbed his shoulders and forced him to sit up.

“Fire! I’m burning! Please! Stop it! Help!” Knox babbled desperately, still trying to pat his legs.

“The fire’s out!” I shouted at him, giving him a hard shake.

The nightwalker blinked a couple times before his gaze focused on me. His whole body was trembling, and tears had begun to streak down his cut, bloody face. Some distant part of me could understand his fears. Most nightwalkers burned so easily, like dry kindling, and the moment Knox had caught fire he was sure that he was dead. And maybe he would have been if I hadn’t been here to control the fire.

“You’re going to be okay,” I murmured, relaxing my hold on his shoulders. My stomach twisted at the feeling of him shaking violently in my hands. Knox nodded his head slowly and looked down at the palms of his hands. They were blistered and burned from where he had tried to beat the fire out. “It could be worse,” I announced, drawing his gaze up to my face. “The fire could have started at your crotch.”

“You’re sick,” he snapped. He scowled at me, which was better than the terror that had gripped him earlier. “What happened?”

“A bomb.”

“No kidding. I mean, what set it off?”

That was the real question. I wagged my eyebrows at him once before pushing to my feet.

“Where’s Heather?” I asked as I helped Knox rise as well. We found her lying dead a few feet away from where Knox had landed. A brick from the house had crushed the back of her skull, splattering her brains. There was no recovering from such a wound in our world. She was gone so quickly, and only because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

This was not going to go over well with Justin. First, a member of his family is murdered by some unknown killer. Then a second member is killed while kindly helping me in the investigation. If I had any sense, I would have sent her away, but as a member of the Ravana family, she had a right to be there as well.

The cry of a fire engine off in the distance seeped into my thoughts. It was getting closer. We needed to get out of here before too large of a crowd gathered—we’d have to alter the memories of a handful of humans as it was. Picking up Heather, I tossed her into the fire that was growing in the remains of the house. She would be incinerated along with the rest of the evidence of Bryce’s existence and any evidence related to his killer.

With Knox hobbling along beside me, I increased the fire eating away at the remains of the house once we were in the street. If I wasn’t going to be able to get into the house then no one would. By the time the fire department got this fire out, there would be nothing left but hot ash.

We were speeding back to the city when Knox started speaking again. However, his brain wasn’t totally functioning yet. “I don’t understand,” he muttered. “Why destroy the evidence after the police had gone through the place during the day?”

“That wasn’t the purpose of the explosion.”

“What do you mean?”

“You think it was a coincidence that the place blew up when we just happened to be there?” I laughed.

“You think someone was trying to kill us?” Knox twisted in his seat, sending his blond hair flying in wild disarray in the wind.

I was beginning to think that someone was trying to kill me. First the Coven flunky’s arrival, and now the explosion just as I was entering the house. The timing was too perfect.

“There was a camera on the front porch,” I explained, keeping my theory to myself for now. No reason to upset Knox just yet. “The same person that killed Bryce knew someone would be by to investigate. I think this person was waiting for someone that didn’t look like a cop.” And for the murderer, I fit the bill. I didn’t look like a police officer in my blue jeans and black button-up shirt. But then, there was enough otherness in my lavender eyes and ultra pale skin to make some people wonder if I was even human.

“But I didn’t sense anyone...I mean, I scanned the area and no one wanted us dead.”

“It could have been done by remote, allowing the person to be miles away.”

“And now he knows you’re associated with Bryce. If he knew Bryce was a nightwalker, he’s going to assume you’re...”

“Yeah, I’ve got a brand-new problem,” I grumbled. It had now become even more imperative that I find Bryce’s murderer. This person had seen my face. If the murderer knew Bryce was a nightwalker, I now fell under that same classification. As a result, anyone I associated with would now come under scrutiny. I slowed the car to a stop at a red light. We were just outside of town, driving along the Savannah River headed toward the riverfront district. “I think a member of the Daylight Coalition killed Bryce and tried to kill us tonight.”

“Because of how he was killed?”

“As well as the timing and the call to the police. Regardless of the reasons for killing Bryce, no nightwalker would risk a human discovering the corpse. Someone knew he was a nightwalker and wanted proof to get out to the rest of the world. This murder was done during the daylight hours when Bryce wouldn’t have been able to fight back.”

“Then why not a shapeshifter? They can walk around during the day,” Knox argued, drumming his fingers on the armrest. I doubted he actually believed it, but he was doing his job and playing devil’s advocate.

“A lycan would have the opportunity, but the risk of exposure is too great. No matter how pissed you are, we all know not to reveal our secret to another human. If the lycan was discovered, not only would his life be forfeit but there’s a good chance that the whole pack would be destroyed.” I shifted the car into first and pushed on the accelerator as the light changed to green. “You’re right that it is a possibility, just not a very strong one,” I conceded. “I’ll check in with Barrett and see if he knows anything about Bryce or if the nightwalker was known to associate with any shifter. At the same time, I want you to check among the nightwalkers. I want to know who he associated with.”

“You think someone tipped off the Coalition?”

“Maybe.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, what’s the name of the girl Bryce wanted to change?”

“Katie Hixson. She’s about thirty-two years old. Medium height, slim, with short blond hair and blue eyes,” Knox listed succinctly.

“Do you know her address?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

I downshifted the car as I pulled over to the side of the road just outside the Dark Room, a nightclub in that catered only to

nightwalkers and lycanthropes. A long line had already begun to stretch outside the bar as a mix of shifters and nightwalkers hoped to get in tonight. It was one of the few places you were likely to run into the nightwalker you were looking for.

“That’s okay. Daniel can locate her for me. You start digging around in Bryce’s past. Call me if you find anything interesting.”

Knox nodded once and slowly got out of the car. By the expression that flashed across his face, each motion was painful. After closing the door, he leaned forward on it, wincing as it cut into his wounded hands. “I’m sorry about the morgue and how I... performed at the house. I—”

“Let it go, Knox. This job takes some getting used to. I’m not Valerio.” I was quick to cut him off. I didn’t want his apologies, particularly out in the open where any nightwalker might be able to hear him. We needed a strong front or there would be the chaos Bishop was so confident was everywhere within my domain. “Just get to work. I’ll be in contact.”

“Mira, you realize that if the Daylight Coalition is behind this, there is a very good chance a member now has your photograph,” Knox grimly pointed out.

“Well, I guess we’re going to have to get this bastard, because I’m not moving,” I said with a smirk. “Get to work.”

The thought chilled me to the shreds of my soul. I had lived more than six hundred years and had never come close to exposing what I was to the world at large. But now it was a very real threat that my identity was in jeopardy. At the very least, I would become the main target for all of the Daylight Coalition.

As I drove off, heading to a quieter part of the city, I pushed the speaker button on my steering wheel and said Daniel’s name into the open air. The Bluetooth connection to my cell phone quickly dialed the number.

“I’m a little busy right now,” Daniel’s voice growled from the speakers of my car.

“I have no doubt you are, but I need your help,” I said, pulling into a dark parking lot. “I have a lead in the case we discussed, but I need you to track her down for me. Name’s Katie Hixson. Slim build with blond hair—”

“And blue eyes,” Daniel finished in a suddenly weary voice.

“You know her?” I was stunned. What were the odds that Daniel knew this nightwalker wannabe?

“Yeah.”

“Do you know where I can find her?”

“Yeah, I’m with her now. She’s dead, Mira.”

4

A dozen profanities tumbled past my lips, filling the air. It was a good thing that the residents of Savannah didn’t know seventeenth century Italian curses or I might have blushed.

“Are you sure she’s dead?” It was a stupid question, but I couldn’t afford for Katie to be dead. Sure, I had planned to kill her if she had anything to do with Bryce’s murder, but that was only *after* I had managed to extract some information from her still-living brain.

“I know dead, Mira,” Daniel snarled. “Her neck has been broken and she’s been drained of blood. She looks like a gray raisin. She’s dead.”

I pounded the steering wheel once with my fist and swallowed a fresh round of curses. This was not how my night was supposed to go. I had hoped to have this whole mess settled before sunrise, but I was beginning to have serious doubts. Bishop was going to serve my head up on a silver platter to the Coven if I continued at this rate. That was assuming the Daylight Coalition didn’t get ahold of me first.

“Where did you find her?” I bit out, trying to rein in my temper. My hands had begun to tremble and it felt as if my throat was starting to close up in fear. I wouldn’t let the Coven take me.

“At home. Her neighbor called. She got concerned when she saw the front door left open.” The scrape of Daniel’s shoes on concrete could be heard in the background. It sounded like he was pacing outside, the one place he could get a little privacy at a murder investigation.

“A wild guess, but the neighbor didn’t see anything?”

“Not a thing. Not even sure when Ms. Hixson got home.”

“Has Archie arrived yet?”

“He’s on his way.”

“Tell him to stall if necessary. I want to look at the body before you move it. What’s the address?”

Daniel gave me quick directions as I shifted back into first and drove out of the dark parking lot. Once I found the right street, the house would be easy to identify. It would be the one surrounded by flashing cop cars and decorated in yellow tape like a giant Christmas tree.

I flew through the gears, zipping across town as fast as I could. Katie’s house was just on the outskirts of the city on the opposite end from where Bryce’s nighttime lair was located. While Bryce’s death had annoyed me, Katie’s obvious murder had caused a knot of worry to start growing in my stomach. Had someone else known about her involvement with Bryce and killed her in fear that she knew something or saw something? Or maybe someone thought she was responsible for Bryce’s untimely demise and had murdered her in revenge?

Yet all these concerns and speculation were pushed to back of my mind as I parked my car at the end of the block from Katie’s house. I had briefly hoped it would be in a questionable part of town so her death could be pawned off as a flash of random violence in a violent neighborhood. Unfortunately, Katie had owned a house in a quiet, family-oriented part of town with its neighborhood watches, window boxes, and decorative flags celebrating the upcoming start of summer. Not the type of place a body was supposed to be found drained and broken.

Popping the trunk, I walked around to the back of the car and pulled out a black blazer. I quickly tucked my shirt into my jeans and pulled on the jacket. I briefly tried to straighten my hair and wipe away some of the blood that covered the side of my face. Without seeing a mirror, I knew I looked like I had been dragged through hell. Yet part of convincing a human that we were something other than what we really were was giving them a good reason to believe us. And right now, I needed to be able to convince the cops milling around this crime scene that I was just another detective.

With my shoulders back and my head up, I walked down the street and past the threshold of the house, pausing long enough to wipe my feet on the brown and black welcome mat. As I passed each police officer, detective, and forensic investigator, I mentally pushed the image of my being another detective into their brains. It took a little extra push because my jeans were torn and dirty. There was also dried blood on my temple and along the side of my face from where my scalp had been cut by flying debris at Bryce’s house.

The process was tiring and the strain was already causing my head to throb along with all the other aches in my body. There were close to a dozen people in the area, not counting the neighbors that were standing in their front yards with looks of horror stretched across their faces. Normally, I wouldn’t dare to come into a crime scene littered with so many people, but three people were dead in less than twenty-four hours and I was beginning to fear that the body count was going to continue to rise if I didn’t find the killer soon. My people didn’t need to be drawn into the spotlight by some psychopathic loose cannon.

In the living room, I found Daniel standing on the fringe of the group huddled around the body sprawled on the floor. His lips were drawn into a frown, causing deep lines to crease his face. An unlit cigarette dangled from his fingertips, waiting for him to finally step outside again so he could light it.

The room was a cheery affair in pale orange with a darker orange acting as an accent. The sofa and chair were covered in white linen and surrounded a honey-wood coffee table. Pictures of flowers in black metal frames lined the walls.

Katie lay on the floor with her arms folded over her chest. It was strange. There was no look of strain on her face, no fear. From what I could see, there were no bruises, scratches, or signs that she had fought for her life. It looked as if someone had lovingly laid her on the ground after he or she was done with the distasteful task of killing the young woman.

But Daniel was right. Her head lay at a slightly odd angle, and broken bone poked and stretched the skin. Her neck had been completely snapped. Not the easiest of feats, and it was very likely that it had been done by a nightwalker. Her skin was also a stomach-turning shade of gray that sagged and hung loose on her body. Someone had drained her of all her blood. But I didn’t know of any nightwalker that could do such a thing in a single feeding, and this whole thing felt too neat for several nightwalkers to be involved.

“Forced entry?” I murmured as I came to stand next to Daniel. We both watched as one of the investigators snapped a series of pictures of the body and the rest of the room.

“No,” Daniel said, pulling the cigarette box from his pants pocket. He returned the loose cigarette back to the box and put the box in his pocket again. “It looks like Ms. Hixson let the murderer in. There’s no sign of struggle. She probably had no idea she was in danger.”

Katie probably knew her attacker. She let the person in when he or she arrived. And when she turned her back on her attacker, the murderer snapped her neck with no pain and little fuss. I frowned. I just couldn’t figure out who the killer was or why Katie was killed shortly after Bryce. Maybe they weren’t necessarily related.

Daniel finally looked over at me and nearly stumbled a step backward. I hadn’t bothered to adjust his perception of me. There was no need, and I had enough on my plate already. “You look like shit,” he whispered, trying to avoid drawing the attention of the others.

“So kind of you to say so,” I muttered.

“Trouble at the house?”

“It’s not there anymore.”

Daniel sighed as he rubbed his eyes and the bridge of his nose. “Did you cause that?”

“I wouldn’t look like this if I did,” I grumbled.

“Same killer?” he whispered.

I shook my head slowly, frowning. “No.” I knew without a doubt that a nightwalker had killed Katie, while a human had been responsible for Bryce’s death.

“Linked?”

“I… I don’t know,” I admitted, wishing I didn’t have to.

Shaking my head, I left Daniel’s side and approached the corpse. I knelt down, ignoring the strange looks I was receiving, and bent over to sniff the body. Before I could get my face close to her, I picked up the overwhelming scent of perfume. It was everywhere; on Katie’s clothes, her hair, her skin. Whoever had touched her was smart enough to douse himself or herself in perfume so I couldn’t pick up the individual scent. Only a lycanthrope might have a strong enough sense of smell to pick it out, but there was a good chance that he wouldn’t recognize the scent of the nightwalker. Otherwise, Katie’s body did not yet reek of death and decay. She had been dead for less than two hours. Her neighbor had just missed walking in on the murder.

The one thing I was sure of was the fact that Katie had been killed by a nightwalker and the murder had occurred shortly after sunset, by someone the woman had possibly known. Katie’s death was too neat and tidy, and there was a lingering feeling of mercy and compassion. This was done by someone who knew her.

Pushing back to my feet, I walked back over to Daniel, keeping my back to the rest of the room. “Tell Archie to call me if anything interesting turns up.”

“You think something will?” he mocked me. We were looking at a woman that had been killed by the breaking of her neck and then drained of her blood, but there wasn’t a drop on the pale tan carpet.

“Like no puncture marks on an exsanguinated corpse?” I offered. When I was kneeling next to Katie, I noticed no puncture marks on her neck or in the interior of her arms. It was possible they were somewhere else on her body, but it was unlikely. It was more likely the nightwalker had healed the wound out of habit. “Yeah, he’ll find something interesting. You might want to also check the bathtub. Some of the blood might have been sent down the drain. I’ll be in contact.”

I quickly left the house and headed back to my car. This wasn’t good. I had a third dead body, and this one was caused by a nightwalker. The peace in my domain was crumbling around me, and the worse it got, the better the chance of humans discovering our secret.

Popping the trunk of my car with my remote, I tossed the blazer inside and pulled my shirt back out of my jeans. The night was not going well and it was about to get worse.

“I don’t think doing a striptease in the middle of the street is going to convince me to allow you to slide on this mess you’ve got in your domain. That’s the third dead body tonight, isn’t it?” Bishop asked from where he leaned up against a tree just a few paces from my car. I hadn’t noticed him there when I walked up because my mind was stuck on the problem at hand.

“You realize that I’m being set up,” I snarled at him, my temper getting worse as fear flooded my veins.

“You’re saying that all these people are being killed just to make you look bad so that you’ll be sent back to the Coven,” Bishop sarcastically said, scratching his chin. “It’s a possibility.”

“Damn it, Bishop!” I stomped over to where he stood leaning against the tree, his arms folded over his large chest. “You know me. You know what we’re capable of. I’m being set up.”

“And it’s working.”

Snarling, I took a swing at him, but he was expecting it. Pushing off the tree, he grabbed both of my wrists and pinned them over my head against the tree. He pressed in close so that his face filled my field of vision. I positively itched to put my knee in his groin, but I waited to hear what he had to say.

“It’s working, Mira. Someone probably does have it in for you and they’re successfully setting you up. How many enemies could you possibly have here?”

“A few,” I admitted. Justin Ravana instantly came to mind. While he had never made any play to seize power of the domain from me, he had always been a steady voice of unrest. But in the end, he kept to himself so I let him be.

“Would any of these enemies have a reason to kill this poor human?”

“One would,” I growled. Killing Katie would be Justin’s way of wiping out the last of Bryce’s ties while potentially making me look bad in front of the Coven. Justin was my next target, and I was happy to take the fight to him.

Frowning, I stared at Bishop for a moment, trying to suppress my few memories of the nightwalker. Too many nights washed in blood and violence. “You know I can clean this up and get the territory back under control. This is about Macaire wanting me under his thumb in Venice,” I said, shifting slightly so that the tree bark wasn’t biting into my back. Macaire had hated me since Jabari had taken me under his wing five centuries ago. With Jabari now missing, the ancient nightwalker now thought it was safe to

make his move against me, and if I didn't think of something fast, it was going to work.

"Why does it have to be about only Macaire?" Bishop shifted his hands so that my wrists were held loosely in one of his large hands. His left hand came down and moved some hair away from my face. "Admit it, Mira. We had fun in Venice together. You used to enjoy our games with the fledglings. Hell, they feared you more than the entire Coven. You thrived on their fear. Why don't you just come home? Macaire will leave you alone if you listen to him."

"I can't go back to that life. I've outgrown it. This is my home now," I said. Leaning forward, I brushed my lips across his cheek. "Why can't you stay here?" I whispered. "You've been with the Coven most of your life. You've got to be growing weary of it. Stay here with me. Make this your new home."

"And go from being a messenger for the Coven to being a flunky for the Fire Starter? Not likely," he said snidely.

"No. Just live here. Be your own person."

Bishop stared silently at me for a minute, the skepticism clear on his face, but I could also see the hope in his eyes. The offer was appealing. Bishop had a lot of freedom due to his position within the court, but not true freedom—not like what I was offering.

"It's tempting, but not everyone's master is as forgiving. My leash is not quite as long as yours," he said, releasing my hands as he stepped away from me. And it was true. I didn't belong to Jabari in the same way Bishop belonged to Macaire. Yet if Jabari demanded I return to Venice, I would out of loyalty and a good dose of fear.

"Then all I ask is that you be fair about this," I pleaded, cupping his face with my hands. "Give me a chance to fix this."

"You're flailing."

"Temporarily. I can fix this."

"One more dead body not of your own making and you're going back with me," Bishop warned, gently lowering my hands from his face.

I nodded, pulling from his grip. "The offer still stands. You're welcome here."

"Maybe someday, but not now, not like this."

5

I was done chasing my tail. I was ready to take the fight to the one person who had the most to gain from my removal. Justin Ravana's three-story brick house was located on a hill on the outskirts of the city. Its location not only allowed him to easily sense the approach of any nightwalker, but he could watch them crawl up his hill like a supplicant coming to request a boon.

Driving up the hill, I realized that I had made a mistake in the handling of him. I had thought that he would be content to rule over his family, and for a time he had been, but now he wanted to take all of Savannah from me. For him, the easiest way to claim it would be through the Coven. I had little doubt that he had been the little bird chirping in the ear of Macaire, telling his lies so that I would be drawn back to Venice and all her horrors.

My temper was barely caged when one of Justin's fledglings showed me to the main parlor where Justin sat waiting for me. The air in the house was thick with the scent of blood and fear. Muffled screams and heavy footsteps could be heard on wooden floors about me.

"Mira, this is a surprise," Justin opened, pushing slowly out of his cushioned high-backed chair as if he was reluctant to rise to his feet in my presence.

"It shouldn't be. Bryce belonged to you, didn't he?"

"And so did poor Heather. Savannah has certainly become a dangerous place to live," he said with a shake of his head.

"I'm sure your fledglings would argue that it always has been."

A smile toyed with his lips as his eyes traveled over the length of me. "Yes, well, one has to do what one must to keep the young ones in line."

"And what did Bryce do to deserve the death he received?"

"You think I had something to do with Bryce's death?" he gasped, looking honestly surprised. "Mira, you know my methods." Again, the same dark grin spread across his lean, angular face, reminding me so much of an animated skull. "If Bryce

had crossed me, I would have taken care of the matter here, in the privacy of my own home. I would have kept the matter in the family.”

“So the fact that Bryce had come to me looking to make his own fledgling didn’t bother you?” I asked.

Justin sat back down in the chair he had been seated in, his sharp gaze drifting away from me to a spot on the floor. His left hand curled into a fist on the arm of the chair, but his voice was calm, even when he spoke again. “I was...unaware of his request, but Bryce knew that I would not object to expanding the family. I would have welcomed his fledgling.”

“Maybe that’s just it. He didn’t want this fledgling to be a part of the Ravana family. He possibly wanted something outside of your reach,” I said, purposefully twisting the knife in his chest as I struggled to keep the smile off of my face.

“Then I would have killed him, but again I would have done it my way. Here and slowly. I’m afraid if you came here looking for Bryce’s killer, you have come to the wrong place.”

Unfortunately, I believed him. “No, that’s not the only reason why I’m here,” I said with a smile. I was about to comment on his recent trip to see the Coven when a bloodcurdling scream rent the air, effectively silencing me and wiping the smile from my face. We both looked up at the ceiling. I got flashes of a naked female chained to the brick wall in the attic being tortured by a lycanthrope and three other nightwalkers. She was streaked with blood, and her face was swollen to the point that she could barely see out of her puffy eyes. One of her tormentors was projecting the fight for Justin’s benefit since the master of the family was stuck dealing with me.

“Who?”

“A new fledgling that has elected to join the Ravana family. She’s being broken in. Would you like to help?”

“No.”

“But it’s been so long since you took the time to appropriately break in a fledgling. These young ones have no concept any longer of what it means to exist in our world. They don’t respect you as they should.”

“I want no part of your games,” I growled.

“But you must. My fledglings ask that you show them what you truly are capable of, great Fire Starter.” There was no missing the sarcasm that was etched into every word he had spoken. A knot twisted in my stomach, and for the first time, I fully scanned the house. There were close to thirty nightwalkers in this house. I had walked into a trap he had been waiting years to spring. Justin hadn’t been building a family; he had been building an army of fledglings for the sole purpose of killing me.

Two sets of doors opened on the parlor as Justin rose and walked over to stand near the wall next to a fire extinguisher. A smug smile lifted his features at the same time more than a dozen nightwalkers rushed into the room. There was no time for clear thought, no room for delicacy. Each one of Justin’s fledglings wanted to kill me.

I dodged fists and clawing nails as I quickly delivered as many blows as possible. There was no time to punch into a chest and rip out a heart. I could only try to knock out as many as possible. I grabbed one snarling body and threw it into the crowd, hoping to create a hole so that I could make a mad dash for the front door. I needed to get out of this room and into a more open area. But the crowd bounced back as quickly as it crumbled, keeping me trapped in the confines of the congested parlor.

There were too many of them. Pain rippled through my body as fists connected with my vital organs and rained on my head and face. I held my own until someone grabbed a chair and hit me in the back, knocking me to my knees. Another kicked me under the chin, throwing me to my back. A cry escaped me as pain flashed through my body. While I was down, a large, hulking nightwalker straddled me and raised his hand with the intent of plunging it into my chest.

Time slowed down for that second and the world drifted away so that there was only that blond nightwalker with a look of triumph on his face. Fear brought a scream to my lips as he erupted into flames. As I expected, he was immediately hit with the white spray of the fire extinguisher, but that didn’t stop me. I focused my powers, burning him on the inside and out. He howled, rolling off me. The nightwalker clawed at his chest until fire finally peeked through his blackened skin. The other nightwalkers drew back, but that didn’t save them.

Sitting up, I directed my powers to all those around me, burning them on the inside and out, cooking them so thoroughly that Justin and his little fire extinguisher couldn’t save one of them. Chaos reigned in the house, but it was my brand of chaos. While I burned any nightwalker that I saw, I also projected the images throughout all of Savannah. Any nightwalker within range would see the bloodbath that was raging through the house.

I am the Fire Starter! I am the Keeper of this domain! This was my answer to the chaos and the threats around me.

I thought I heard Bishop’s laughter in my head as I doused the last of the flames and rose to my feet. The room was filled with charred, blackened bodies. Justin was in the far corner, still holding the now empty fire extinguisher. I smiled at him as I approached.

“You were right,” I said, grabbing a handful of his brown hair and slamming his head into the wall. “It has been way too long since I properly broke in a fledgling. It’s a shame about your family, though. I think I destroyed most of them.”

“Mira—”

“The Ravana family is no more. You will return to the Coven and tell them that I have restored order here.”

“Y-y-yes,” he agreed, attempting to nod, but he couldn’t move his head within my grip.

“And when I see you again, I will kill you.”

Releasing him, I stepped over the bodies of the dead and walked out to my car. I didn't expect Justin to go to the Coven. It worked to his benefit if they thought that the city was still a mess. But that didn't matter now. Bishop had witnessed the cleansing.

Nice job, came Bishop's taunting voice in my head.

Will that do? I asked, ready to have him out of my hair and back to the Coven reporting the good news.

Not quite. You have no proof that you actually killed the murderer.

Soon.

6

Leaning against my car, I pulled my cell phone from my back pocket. My hands were shaking and my legs were weak beneath me, threatening to buckle. I hurt in a dozen different places, and they all seemed to be healing too slowly for my liking. Hunger gnawed at me, begging me to stop long enough to feed. I had lost too much blood between the explosion at Bryce's house and this fight. I needed to rest and heal, but there simply wasn't time with Bishop lurking around in my domain. I had to press on despite my growing weakness.

I dialed Barrett Rainer's number, grateful that I finally had something work in my favor. With the presence of the lycanthrope at the Ravana house, I now had the leverage I needed to call in a favor from the Alpha for the Savannah Pack. Lycans were not supposed to take part in the torture of fledglings. Justin was correct in that it was part of our breaking-in process, and lycans were not supposed to be around to muddy up the waters when allegiance was on the line.

While I wouldn't necessarily refer to Barrett as a friend, we were on comfortable, civil terms. In general, our contact was limited to the occasional check-in around the full moon and if there was some kind of problem.

"Having a good night?" Barrett's deep baritone filled my ear when he answered the call. The grapevine in the supernatural realm was fast and far-reaching. I wasn't at all surprised that he knew about Bryce's murder and probably the explosion as well. Katie's death would take longer to spread since she was human.

"I've had better," I growled, pacing away from the rear of the car. "I have a favor to call in."

"I've got problems of my own at the moment. Why do I owe you a favor?"

"I caught a lycan at Ravana's taking part in the torture of a fledgling. You know that it's not permitted. I left him alive for you to deal with, but..."

"But I now owe you a favor," he bit out.

"I need you to get your boys out looking for someone for me. A member of the Daylight Coalition. There's at least one in town. I'm willing to bet that he's behind Bryce's murder and the attempt on my life."

"Actually, I've got someone here that might interest you," Barrett announced. I could easily imagine the smug smile that spread across his hard, angular face.

My feet skid to a halt in the gravel-riddled street. I stood with my back to Ravana's house and faced the growing darkness. "What do you mean?"

"Someone from the Daylight Coalition just walked into my restaurant and ordered dinner." Barrett owned and operated an Italian restaurant downtown called Bella Luna, which was somewhat ironic since his family's ancestry was mostly German. Apparently, at some point, a member of his family married an Italian woman, and she started the restaurant that has been handed down over the generations.

"What? Did he flash his official Daylight Coalition membership card hoping to get a discount?" I didn't mean to be so snide, but fear and frustration were eating away at me. I was running out of time before Bishop arrived to claim my hide.

"Hardly. I can read his thoughts." He sounded much calmer than me. It was quiet where he was, making me think that he had called from his office rather than standing over a potentially half-dead man. If it was known that someone was from the Coalition, many of our kind would take it upon themselves to immediately cut short his life span. Neither side did anything to put a halt to these activities as long as no evidence was left behind. It wasn't a pretty arrangement, but it was get them before they got us.

"Besides," the lycanthrope said, his voice dropping a little closer to a growl for the first time since he had called. "We get

them on occasion. They pop into the bars, restaurants, and shops with any form of the word *moon* in the name. I guess they're hoping to catch us acting like animals so they can do the world a great service and put us down."

I paced back toward the car, shoving one hand through my hair, getting my fingers temporarily stuck. My dirty, blood-matted hair was a knotted mess. "Are you going to put him down or are you going to let me talk to him first?" I needed to know if our unexpected guest to the city of Savannah had anything to do with Bryce's murder.

"Will he survive the interview?"

"It depends on his answers. It's doubtful."

"Then you can have him."

I clenched my teeth and swallowed my next snide comment. I was determined to have this man regardless of what Barrett's wishes were. Two nightwalkers were dead, a house had been blown up, and a human was dead in connection to one of the dead nightwalkers. And now I had some unknown Daylight Coalition schmuck wandering around in my territory. He had to be connected to this mess in some way. I just had to figure out how he fit in this puzzle.

"How much longer do you think he'll be at the restaurant?" I demanded as I reached into the front pocket of my jeans and pulled out the keys.

"Probably another thirty minutes at the most. He's already ordered his dinner and it should be arriving within a couple minutes."

"That's fine. I can be there by then. I'll park behind the restaurant and follow him after he leaves."

I paused as I was about to jump in the car and looked up at Ravana's house. The fledgling was still in the attic, chained to the wall. For a moment, I wondered if I should go up and free her, but I quickly shook off the thought and got into the car. If she couldn't find a way to free herself, then she would never survive in my world.

Back in the car, I was flying across the city. The restaurant was downtown, not far from the Dark Room. I planned on swinging by to get Knox before arriving at the restaurant. I didn't particularly need the backup, but this was Knox's investigation, and I had a feeling we would be able to get a lot out of this human if we could keep him alive long enough to pick his brain.

"I have to get back," Knox announced as he fell into the passenger seat beside me. "Gregor knew Bryce and Katie." I had filled him in about Katie's death when I called to tell him I would pick him up. He already knew about what happened at Justin's; all the city's nightwalkers knew about that.

"Hopefully, he'll stay alive long enough to be questioned," I said under my breath.

"Another body?"

"Not yet, but our luck hasn't been that good tonight." I looked over my shoulder at the front entrance where a nightwalker bouncer by the name of Adam stood glaring at the crowd. His brown hair was cropped short on his head and his black T-shirt was stretched over bulging muscles, making him an impressive figure even if he hadn't been a nightwalker.

Adam, tell Gregor that I want him to remain here when he arrives. Knox and I want to speak with him. This message was conveyed with a brief touch of my mind to his. Yet, no matter how brief, I could still feel the flood of fear that shivered through him at my touch. I tried to ignore it, but there were times when it ate at me nonetheless. I was trying to protect him and all of my kind, but he feared me like most nightwalkers feared the Coven. And after what had happened at Ravana's, it was worse than usual. I could feel a wave of fear crashing off all the nightwalkers that saw me outside the club.

Turning my attention back to the road, I let off the clutch and jumped out into the traffic. We rushed down to the river, cutting down and around one street after another as we drew closer to Bella Luna. It took only a few minutes to reach the restaurant, leaving me to settle the car in a shadowy area in the back where the deliveries were made.

"Do I scare you?" I asked without warning after sitting in silence for several minutes.

"I beg your pardon." Knox turned in his seat and looked at me, his lips twisting slightly as he was fighting to hold back a smile.

"Do I scare you?" It was harder to say the second time, but I forced the words out.

"Scare me?" Knox stared at me for a moment before a sigh finally escaped him. He leaned his right elbow on the door and shoved his fingers through his dirty, bloody blond hair. He had taken the time to clean up slightly while at the club, but he still looked ragged. "Mira, I feel like there's no right answer here."

Slumping in my seat, I relaxed my grip on the steering wheel, letting my hand fall into my lap. "You know me, Knox. I want the truth."

"Yes, you scare me. You know you do. After the show of power at Justin's, how could we all not fear you?" Knox said in a sudden rush as if the words were stampeding from his chest. "You're the Fire Starter. You can kill us all with a thought. And even if you weren't the Fire Starter, you're still powerful enough to wipe the floor with any one of us. So, yes, you scare me."

"But..." I inserted, prompting him to continue when he seemed to hesitate.

"But I know Valerio. I spent more than two centuries with my maker. You've known him for even longer. I think you're more like him than you sometimes realize. You're more emotional, but you can be just as methodical. Whether anyone else realizes it, there's a method to your madness, like Valerio. You're about protecting the secret and being honorable. As long as a nightwalker doesn't cross those two lines, he's going to wake up the next sunset. The others don't realize it, do they?"

"I can feel it when I enter a room or when I touch their minds. I can feel the shiver of fear, the recoil when I get too close. I feel trapped. I don't want them to fear me, yet the only way I can get their complete obedience is for them to fear me." Each word was forced out between my clenched teeth. I was tired of being the outsider after more than six centuries of life. I was tired of being the outsider within my own domain.

"Do you know what would make it easier for them to accept you?"

I shifted in my seat slightly and looked over at my companion, surprised that he was willing to offer me a suggestion. "What?"

"Date another nightwalker."

I chuckled softly to myself and shook my head. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not. I've been here awhile and I've never heard of you with another nightwalker."

I looked over at Knox again, stunned to find that he was absolutely serious about this ridiculous suggestion. "Not a chance."

"Mira, dating another nightwalker within your domain might convince them that you're not a heartless killing machine. That there is something feeling about you."

"Mmm...your comments warm my cold, dead heart," I mocked. This conversation was taking a turn that I wasn't expecting. I turned the key in the ignition enough to get the clock radio to flash on. We had been sitting there for only a couple of minutes. *Damn it!* I had started this nightmare conversation.

"I'm serious."

"So, what? Are you offering to be my boyfriend?"

Knox stared at me for a long time, his eyes moving over my face. I knew I looked like a mess. All the wounds I had sustained while at Bryce's and Justin's had healed, but I was still covered in my own blood along with dirt and a little of Knox's blood. There was nothing attractive about me at this moment in time. But it was more than that. Knox knew better than most who I was. He knew of me before we had ever met. His maker, Valerio, and I had run together for a few centuries back in Europe. I had no doubt that Valerio had told his fledgling more than a few entertaining tales of the old days. Beyond that, Knox had been brave enough to try to get to know me when he arrived in Savannah. Unlike anyone else within my domain, I felt like a rejection from Knox would actually be a rejection of who I was, not necessarily of the image I presented to those in my domain.

And in truth, it had been a couple of centuries since I had last been involved in a serious romantic relationship. The last one had ended badly, and I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to put myself in that vulnerable position again. Certainly not when the peace of my domain was being threatened.

"Do you honestly want me to offer to be your boyfriend?" he finally asked.

I was saved from having to reply to his strange question when the heavy metal door leading into Bella Luna's kitchen exploded open, banging against the brick wall of the building. A large mass came flying out of the doorway and landed halfway across the back parking lot. It rolled a few feet before stopping and groaning. Whoever it was, was still alive...for now.

A series of low growls filled the darkness, drawing my gaze back toward the restaurant. Three men stepped out of the restaurant, their eyes glowing a frightening copperish-red. They were all dressed in black slacks and pristine white shirts. The trio was followed by Barrett, who stood outlined by the light coming from the doorway. His broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist. He was one hundred percent hard muscle, and by the way he clenched his fists at his side, seriously pissed.

"Did the guy try to leave without paying his check?" Knox whispered below the blood-chilling growls.

"No," I murmured, my concentration elsewhere. I had already reached out to the creature to discover the mass was human; he had pulled a knife on a female server in the restaurant—a female shapeshifter. Sifting briefly through the thoughts in his mind, I discovered that his name was Franklin Thomas and he was from the Daylight Coalition. "Shit," I hissed. This lump of blood and stupidity was the one I had come to fetch.

Putting one sneaker on the soft leather seat, I launched myself over the door of the convertible. I had to get between the schmuck and the lycans before they tore him up. My stomach knotted and I struggled to keep my voice firm and even. "You can't do this, Barrett."

"I'm sorry, but our agreement is off," Barrett replied in a low voice, not at all sounding sorry. "He attacked Erica, threatened her."

Damn it all to hell. I didn't know most of the lycanthropes by name, but I had made a point of learning the names of Barrett's immediate family. Erica was Barrett's younger sister. Of all the people the human could have picked, he chose a blood member of the ruling family. I was no longer sure I could delay his execution now.

"Barrett, we both know that business comes before personal in our world," I countered in a gentle yet firm voice. With four lycans spread out before me, I wasn't sure I could keep them all at bay. "The secret comes before personal vendettas."

"I'll not let you tie my hands like this!" Barrett took a step closer to me, and the other werewolves closed in as well. The air seemed to shimmer with power. They wouldn't bother to shift, but they would call on whatever energy they had at their disposal to take me down and get to the human.

Slowly walk over to the man and get him to his feet, I directed Knox telepathically.

"I need your patience. This man owes me answers. He may have killed Bryce and I think he attempted to kill Knox and me

earlier tonight.”

“No!” The sound was more of a snarl than actual English, but I got the point and so did his compatriots. They all thought I was going to kill the human because he potentially attacked me first. It would be my right, and Barrett was pissed because his sister’s slight would never be properly avenged. But, no, I didn’t plan on killing the human. I had a much better idea in mind.

As the werewolves lurched forward, I threw out my hands to my sides, creating a semicircle of fire between me and the lycans. It wouldn’t stop them for long, but I needed only a few seconds.

Get him out of here, I ordered Knox. I’ll catch up.

I heard the man groan once and then there was only the soft whisper of fabric. Knox had lifted up the human and run to a safer location. I didn’t need to tell him to be careful. My main concern was the man doing something stupid to anger Knox, who could kill him before I’d had my chance to question the Coalition flunky.

The moment I felt that Knox was a few blocks away, I lowered and extinguished the flames. The lycanthropes didn’t hesitate. I narrowly dodged one fist flying toward my face and answered by slamming the heel of my palm into his solar plexus. The air exploded from his lungs, dropping him to his knees as he gasped for air. Balanced on the balls of my feet, I spun to my left and ducked down as another charged. I landed two blows and dodged one before I finally sent him flying across the parking lot.

The third stood back, his body hunched over as he struggled to find a way to take me down when his two companions so quickly failed. Barrett also remained in the background, his large hands clenched into fists. He was still smart enough to know that if he attacked me it could cause an all-out war between the shifters and the vampires in my domain. For now, this was just a little scuffle and I was simply defending myself.

I was shaky on my feet and there was a fine trembling in my fingers, but the rest in the car had given me the strength I needed to face off against Barrett if it came down to it. “I won’t kill him, Barrett,” I called out, my eyes locked on the one lycanthrope besides the Alpha that was still standing. “I need answers, and that man dead won’t help me get those answers.”

“Mira—”

“You can have him back when I’m done, I promise.”

“Are you serious?” The hardened edge had left his voice—he seemed surprised by my offer. The change in tone was enough to get his people to give me a little more space.

“Dead serious.”

“Leave us.” Without another word, the three werewolves filed out of the parking lot and back into the restaurant, closing the door behind them. The power that had flooded the small parking lot instantly left with the light breeze that blew through, shifting the leaves in the nearby trees. “He tried to kill you?” Barrett said once we were alone.

“He’s not the only one.”

“We didn’t—”

I knew what he was about to say and I cut him off. “He’s not the only one who’s tried to kill me tonight and he won’t be the last. There’s always someone trying to kill me. It’s the world we live in.”

“Your world, not mine,” Barrett corrected.

I smiled at him as I walked over to my car. “I’ll contact you when I’m done with the human,” I said, then drove off before he could say anything further. Whether Barrett wanted to admit it or not, we lived in the same world, with rules that threatened to choke those that could not accept it. I loved this world and its tight boundaries. Finding ways to manipulate the system we all lived in was one of the few things that still got the blood pumping in my veins, so to speak.

7

I located Knox at a warehouse a few blocks away from Bella Luna. It seemed as if he was reluctant to stray too far considering I had been outnumbered by a group of angry lycanthropes. But then, Knox still had a touching tendency to underestimate me.

After my car was properly stowed, I joined him in the nearly empty warehouse with the Daylight Coalition member. The dark-haired man paced the open area, his eyes never straying long from Knox as he looked for possible exit routes.

“There are two doors on the ground floor and a third on the second floor that leads to the roof,” I announced as I soundlessly walked across the main floor. I knew the warehouse because I owned it. It was kept empty for meetings just like this one.

The overhead lights remained out, but patches of light spilled through dirty windows into the gritty expanse filled with large crates and warped wooden pallets. I stepped into a square of light and stayed there so Franklin could see me clearly. “But you won’t make it to any of those exits unless I want you to.”

“Why’d you kidnap me?” he demanded in a harsh, ugly voice. His accent didn’t contain any of the soft Southern drawl that I had become accustomed to when dealing with humans. He was from somewhere up north originally.

“Kidnap you? I think you mean saved your sorry ass.” Knox laughed deeply, shoving his hands into the back pockets of his torn jeans as he leaned against the wall. “You threaten the sister of the owner of Bella Luna, and you expect to walk out with your balls still attached? Very unlikely, my friend.”

“I’m not your friend!” he raged, taking one step closer to Knox before backing off again.

“I know what you are!” Franklin shouted. He paced toward me as if his courage had returned for a second before it left him and he paced away. “You’re a vampire.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to deny it, but I let the comment pass. If he was the one that blew up Bryce’s house, then he mostly likely saw me at the house seconds before it exploded, and now I stood unharmed before him. Was there a better explanation than the fact that I was a nightwalker? Well, none that would make any sense.

“And you’re a member of the Daylight Coalition,” I said with a light shrug of my shoulders. He honestly seemed shocked by my sudden pronouncement. He stumbled backward a couple steps and shook his head, causing me to laugh. “You know about us, but do you honestly think we wouldn’t know about you?”

I stopped laughing suddenly, letting the silence overwhelm him before I started speaking again. “You kill nightwalkers. This morning, you killed one by the name of Bryce at the edge of town. He was tall, slender, with brown hair and freckles. He looked like he was nineteen. You killed him and made sure the body was left in a spot where the sunlight could reach it.” As I spoke, I watched the memories playing back in his mind like a silent movie. In a slightly broken jumble, I saw Franklin drag Bryce’s unconscious body up from the basement. With an enormous knife, he sawed open the nightwalker’s chest and cut out the heart. He then removed the head. The whole time, Franklin was grinning as he was washed in Bryce’s blood.

Bryce had been asleep and completely helpless when the human struck just after sunrise. Nothing in heaven or earth could have wakened him. Some would argue that at least he felt no pain. But he also had no chance to fight back. No chance to fight for his right to exist.

I suppressed a shiver that bit at my muscles and ignored the ache in my fangs. I couldn’t kill this coldhearted monster. I needed the answers he held. He knew the *why* and the final *who*.

“How did you find out about Bryce?” I asked, doing the best I could to swallow back my anger. “I can’t imagine you found him on your own considering that you’re not from around here.” I squatted like a toad among his memories, waiting for the image of the person who had betrayed Bryce. Yet I was momentarily distracted by the smile that blossomed on his face. The scowl that twisted his features melted away, and his eyes widened as a grin split his mouth.

“I didn’t know about him until one of your kind told me about him,” he proudly announced, hoping to get a rise out of me, but I didn’t react. I had already suspected that a nightwalker was somehow involved in this mess. But hearing those ugly words fall from his lips didn’t stop the flash of anger that ripped through me.

“Who?” I whispered.

“Why would I tell you?”

“In hopes of getting a quick, merciful death.” I took two quick steps out of the light, approaching my companion. He lurched backward, nearly stumbling in his awkward haste. I smiled as his own smile faded. “You can tell me or I can pick it out of your mind. Besides, why would you want to protect this nightwalker?”

“What do I care about some stupid fucking vamp? She came to me bitching about being turned against her will and that she wanted me to kill the bastard that did it. She was some blond bitch. Said her name was Katie.”

As he spoke, I watched him mentally replay the moment when she had approached him at night in a lonely parking lot. But something was off. Katie was not now nor was she ever a nightwalker. And yet the image of the nightwalker was blurred so that I could only pick out the figure’s slight form and blond hair. The person was definitely female, but the face was unclear. The nightwalker that spoke to him had tampered with his memory, but had not done a very good job of it.

Did you see? I silently asked Knox, who was still watching from the other side of the room. I never heard him move, but I could feel that he was now closer to me than he had been only seconds earlier.

Yes. That’s not Katie. She wasn’t a nightwalker, unless...

I saw the body. She’s not rising tomorrow night. She’s gone. Even if Katie hadn’t been drained of all her blood, it was unlikely she would have been able to heal her broken neck in the process of being reborn. In general, the human had to be in working order if he or she was going to be brought over. We could heal nearly any wound once we were nightwalkers, but we all had to start off in good shape.

“You’ve been lied to, my friend,” I commented, turning my attention back to the human. It wasn’t Katie. Furthermore, the nightwalker had lied about the reason for having Bryce killed. It was impossible to be made into a nightwalker against your will. If you didn’t want it, you died. And sometimes, even if you did want it, you died. You had to fight death for your soul during the process and he wasn’t the most congenial loser.

“What the hell do I care? A vampire is dead. One less to prey on humans.”

“Yes,” I hissed. “One less.” Turning on my right heel, I headed back toward the entrance of the warehouse with Knox at my side. I was done with the human. Between his uninformative answers and his damaged memories, I had gotten from him all the information I was going to be able to get. I was content to hand him over to Barrett. I had a bigger target in mind at this point. While combing through Franklin’s mind, I had caught the address for a Coalition safe house in Atlanta and a second one in Memphis, Tennessee. I’d see to it that that information was put to good use.

The shot was like an explosion in the silence of the warehouse. Pain punctured my back to the right of my spine, ripping through flesh and organs, before exiting through my chest. My whole body bowed and jerked forward. I slid a couple inches on the tips of my toes before my knees gave out on me and I collapsed to the floor. The bastard had missed my heart, but the bullet cut through one of my lungs. Lucky for me, I didn’t need my lungs any longer, and it wouldn’t take long for the damage to repair itself.

Knox knelt beside me, one hand on my arm while I pressed a hand to my chest to stem the bleeding. “Are you okay?” he demanded in a snarl. He was simply waiting for me to say that I was okay before he launched himself at Franklin.

“You forgot to search him?” I bit out.

“I’m sorry. I...I forgot. I’ll take care of him now.”

“He’s mine,” I replied in a low growl. Gripping Knox’s arm, I jumped to my feet and rushed across the warehouse to where the human stood, attempting to unload the contents of his handgun into my body. However, all the bullets went wide. There was no hitting me. I was moving too fast. A grim blur of color in the dimly lit warehouse. He didn’t know I was there until my hands closed around his throat and I threw him against one of the support beams. By then, his gun was clicking sadly, out of bullets.

“You have my undivided attention now,” I said, leaning in close enough that my breath brushed against his ear. “Is there something you wanted?” My chest pressed against his shirt, soaking up some of my blood. I pulled back just far enough that he could now see my fangs, sending a shiver of fear through him.

My hands clenching his shirt trembled as I fought the urge to sink my teeth into his throat. But it was more than just the need to drink in his blood. The monster that lay deep within my chest roared to life, demanding that I rip flesh and break bone. I wanted to hear him scream in pain until the sound echoed through the empty warehouse. I needed him drowning in pain, instead of emitting the terrified little whimpers that escaped him now.

Slowly I regained control of myself. In my world, I had the right to tear and rend and shred. He attacked me first. He tried to kill me at Bryce’s and again here. Unfortunately, I had other plans for this shivering sack of flesh that would serve me better than a moment’s joy in killing this bastard.

“I thought so,” I said, shoving him a little as I released his shirt.

Again, I turned and walked away. Knox accompanied me out of the warehouse. His mouth opened the moment the steel door closed with a solid clang behind us. “We forgot to ask about the video camera,” Knox said, sliding to a stop in the gravel.

“He’ll only lie about it, wasting our time,” I said, halting him before he could go back into the warehouse.

“But if they have your picture—”

“I’m screwed, I know.” Screwed was an understatement. If it got out that I was a nightwalker, even as a joke, the Coven would have my head and heart on a platter before sunrise. “Do we have anyone who might be able to hack into the Coalition database?”

“Hackers? Nightwalkers, no. But Barrett has at least a pair.”

“Perfect.” I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and dialed Barrett’s number. “He’s at the warehouse, but won’t remain here for long. He’s all yours now,” I announced as soon as he picked up the line.

“Thank you,” Barrett murmured in a low voice. He was grateful, but he wasn’t particularly happy. He owed me now and it sat heavy in his stomach.

“You can track him by the scent of my blood,” I added, twisting the knife.

Barrett knew the only way my blood would get on Franklin would be if he managed to wound me. He now owed me a very big favor considering I had walked away from a very personal slight so that he could have his revenge. And if there was one thing that all the other races had in common, it was the fact that not one of us liked to be beholden to the other.

“What do you need?” he said as if he were grinding the words up in his clenched teeth.

“A favor. He may have gotten me on film earlier. I need all evidence of it erased. Files, e-mails, and possibly data removed from the Coalition database. Do you have people who can handle it?”

“You know I do,” he replied. His voice sounded a lot less gruff than earlier. As favors went, this one was fairly easy. His people were potentially getting access to our enemy’s files while he was evening a score with me.

“My fate is in your hands.”

“Don’t worry, Mira. I’ll keep you off YouTube.”

Smiling, I shoved the phone into my pocket and pulled my keys out of my other pocket as we walked around the side of the building to where my car was parked. Opening the trunk, I dug around in my little bag for a fresh shirt. “So did we learn anything of value tonight?”

“That a nightwalker was the one to contact Franklin,” Knox replied.

He was right. A werewolf would never have been able to blur a person’s memory like we saw and it was extremely unlikely that a warlock or witch would be able to find where Bryce kept his daylight sanctuary. However, nightwalkers frequently shared that information when they allowed other nightwalkers to bed down with them during the day in rare moments of trust or when seeking to start a family.

“Whoever it was didn’t know how to properly mask her appearance. She vaguely looked like Katie, but it was very shaky as if the person was struggling to either hold the illusion or was unable to properly mend Franklin’s memories.”

“A fledgling?” Knox asked. He sounded skeptical and I couldn’t blame him.

“Possibly.” I quickly unbuttoned my shirt and looked down to find that the wound had completely healed, but now there was a trail of drying blood running down into the waist of my jeans. Wiping off as much blood as possible, I threw the shirt into my trunk to destroy later and pulled on a dark gray T-shirt.

“It could just be an older nightwalker that never had any proper training,” Knox suggested.

“A fledgling seems unlikely,” I agreed, shutting the trunk of my car. “Bryce didn’t have any fledglings of his own and he should have been old enough to easily defend himself from any of the fledglings within the area.”

“Which is maybe why a fledgling got the Coalition to do the dirty work?”

“Could a fledgling be so stupid? She had to know that we would look into this and track her down.” I turned and leaned against the car for a minute, my arms folded over my chest.

“And maybe that was a part of her plan,” interjected a new voice. I looked up in time to see Bishop step from the shadows beside the wall of the warehouse. “Maybe this fledgling’s goal is to kill you as well as this Bryce person.”

“She’s getting closer if that’s the case,” Knox added, making me scowl at him.

“Don’t make faces at the boy, Mira. He’s right,” Bishop teased. “You’ve been nearly killed three times already to-night and you’ve yet to catch this schemer.”

“I can understand killing Bryce for some reason related to our world and even the attempts on me. It’s all involved with our world. But why kill Katie Hixson? All she wanted to do was to enter our world.”

“Don’t know,” Knox said with a shrug of his shoulders. He stood before me, his hands shoved into his front pockets. “Jealousy? Maybe the fledgling didn’t want Bryce bringing over Katie or maybe she was jealous that he would rather spend time with Katie than with another nightwalker.”

It wasn’t a new story. A fledgling was hurt because a nightwalker fell for a human and wanted to turn him or her. I’d seen it all play out like a Shakespearean tragedy—everyone dead. “We need the answer to those questions.”

“Only one place left to get them.”

“Gregor.” The name escaped me in a low growl. If there was one nightwalker I wouldn’t mind seeing with his head and heart removed, it was Gregor. He was a few centuries old and controlled a clique of nightwalkers that I found more than a little annoying.

For now, I would have to put aside my distaste for him. If Bryce was known to travel with Gregor on occasion, then the nightwalker would be able to give me more information as to who might have had Bryce killed and Katie Hixson drained.

8

Gregor wasn’t at the Dark Room. Adam quickly informed me upon arriving that when Gregor discovered I was looking for him, he left the Dark Room and asked that I meet him at the Docks. I could only guess that the nightwalker didn’t want to be seen being questioned by me. I could understand his hesitance, but that didn’t make me happy about it.

The Docks was a nightclub near the riverfront that catered to the local Goth scene with its dark, smoky decor and nonstop

industrial music blaring in the background. It was one of my favorite places to spend an evening. The clientele were content to just let me enjoy the music and the dancing. It was a good place to hide when you were trying to avoid the world around you.

Slipping ahead of the crowd that waited to get into the club, I slapped a fifty on the counter per my usual no-questions policy with the management of the club. They didn't ask to see my identification and didn't attempt to put one of those paper strips on my wrist indicating that I was over the age of twenty-one. I didn't come to this place to drink alcohol.

Gregor sat alone at a table in a dark corner of the nightclub. He wore a dark red, knee-length jacket over a black shirt and black double-breasted vest with large silver buttons. A gold chain for his pocket watch hung from his vest pocket. His whole attire screamed of Victorian aristocracy, making him appear to be horribly out of place in this bar filled with black leather, silver chains, and tattered lace. Regardless of the fact that Gregor had actually survived the Victorian era, he was now part of the Steampunk generation, which was a somewhat distant cousin to the Goth movement that refused to completely fade away. While I doubted he believed in their mentality, the Steampunk generation did fit his taste in clothing.

"Mira, it's so good to see you again. It's been ages," Gregor said, easily rising to his feet as we approached his table.

"Hmm...yes, not since you suggested that a number of nightwalkers go running with the shifters on a full moon. How many fledglings did we lose that night? Six?" I said with a frown as I took a seat opposite him.

A grin spread across his face as he returned to his seat. "Eight."

"And four lycans were badly injured," Knox added from where he stood just behind my right shoulder. There were only two chairs at the tiny table, and I was surprised that he had chosen to stand behind me rather than pull over another chair. But then Knox was from the Old World and had been raised by an Old World nightwalker. Standing indicated that he was my assistant rather than my supposed equal sitting beside me.

"But it was fun. I'm sorry you missed out," Gregor continued, nearly chuckling.

"It seems I missed out on some other fun, too," I said, preferring to finally switch the subject. There was nothing I could do about Gregor's twisted sense of humor. He had convinced a group of young nightwalkers to go running with some werewolves on the night of a full moon. There was the inevitable scuffle, and eight nightwalkers got shredded in the process, as Gregor knew would happen. My concern was the four lycans that got hurt. Barrett had not been happy about it, but then we both knew there was nothing we could do about it. We had to give our people some room to make stupid mistakes so long as humans weren't involved.

"If you're referring to what happened to Bryce, I had nothing to do with his demise as I'm sure you know. I heard that he was killed during the daylight hours," Gregor said, sitting back in his chair. The music shifted at the back of the nightclub where the dance floor was located, moving to a heavy thumping beat that vibrated in my chest. I would rather be dancing, surrounded by smiling, sweating humans caught up in the music, than dealing with Gregor and this entire mess.

"For once, I believe you," I said with a frown. "I need to know who Bryce hung out with. Particularly females. Someone killed him and Katie Hixson."

For the first time since we walked into the Docks, the smile that filled Gregor's face slipped away and he honestly looked confused. "I don't understand. Katie was murdered?"

"Shortly after sunset. It was a nightwalker," Knox interjected.

"You knew Katie?" I demanded, drawing Gregor's stunned gaze from Knox to me again.

"Yes, Bryce and the rest of his group brought her in to the Dark Room a few times. She was a lovely young lady. Very polite and sweet. Not the usual Goth, living-dead nonsense that you see hanging on our kind as if we were their long-lost messiah."

"Was there anyone jealous of Bryce and Katie? Anyone who might have wanted them both dead?" Knox inquired.

"Bryce, yes. I can think of one person who would want Bryce dead, but not Katie. Lauren was the one that introduced Katie to Bryce and the rest of his small group. Lauren had known Katie while she was a human and had brought her into the fold as a human. It could have been anyone within the group he hung with. There were three females: Lauren, Bridgette, and Kari. And then Charles traveled with that flock on occasion, but not so much within the past few years."

I was familiar with Bridgette. She was about fifty years old and had moved into the area with my permission more than twenty years ago. However, the other two I wasn't overly familiar with. "How old are Lauren and Kari?"

"Kari is nearly thirty, I believe. She moved here with Charles. Lauren is really fresh—five or six years, I think. I'm not sure who her maker is. She's never mentioned him and I've never seen her with anyone but Bryce and the rest of his group."

"Are any of them a member of Ravana's family?"

"Kari and Bridgette are, I believe."

"Where can I find them?" I demanded, drumming my fingernails on the sticky surface of the small circular table that separated us.

"All three ladies are back at the Dark Room. Charles is—"

"Thanks, Gregor." I pushed to my feet. I had heard enough. I knew who had killed Katie and set the Daylight Coalition on Bryce.

"Mira, you don't think it was one of those girls?" Gregor demanded, lurching awkwardly to his feet in his surprise. "They're just fledglings. They couldn't have..."

"Stay here, Gregor. You don't want anyone to know you ratted them out," Knox said, earning a low snarl from the

nightwalker. I bit back a smile as I walked out of the nightclub and into the fresh air. It wasn't much cooler than the uncomfortably warm nightclub.

Knox was as irritated with Gregor as I was. The nightwalker seemed to parade himself around my domain as if he ran it. He made sure that he was acquainted with everyone within the Savannah area and made himself up to be more powerful than he really was. However, those within my domain that were more powerful and stronger (including myself) tended to ignore him since he was just an annoyance. He also proved to be a valuable source of information on the rare occasion, so we all let him be. Regardless of all his pomp, he knew where the line was and he was very careful not to cross it. Dance on it, spit on it, and kick dirt on it—sure. But he didn't cross it.

“So, you know who the killer is?” Knox said, walking beside me as we headed back to the Dark Room.

“Yes, and you're going to end her bloody reign for me.”

I looked over at Knox to find him smiling at me, a faint glow touching his eyes. “As you wish.”

9

I paused just off the entrance of the Dark Room, beyond the two empty coat check rooms, and looked over the club. The main floor was lit almost entirely by candles in wall sconces and in hurricane lamps on the tables. The walls were lined with booths that were cloaked in deep shadows that could be easily penetrated by our superior night vision. Thick burgundy curtains made of heavy velvet lined the entrance to each booth, ensuring just a little more privacy for its occupants. The music was a low, hypnotic beat, burrowing its way into the brains of the dancers as they swayed and moved with it.

The Dark Room was an alluring den of seduction and peace in a world that seemed to be passing with greater speed. In here, everything stopped for those few night hours and we were able to stop pretending to be something we were not. Of course, it meant that we had to find a way to live in harmony with each other while within the confines of the bar, but even that was a temporary arrangement as Bryce's death had proved.

It was nearly midnight and the place was busy. The dance floor in the center of the main room was packed with writhing bodies and the booths were filled with others. It seemed as if the majority of the lycanthrope and nightwalker population had showed up. I hadn't planned to make this a performance for both races, but then an audience had never deterred me when something important had to be accomplished. And in this case, it might prove to be useful.

Tilting my head back toward my right where Knox was standing behind my shoulder, I asked, “Do you know the group that he spoke of?”

“They're in the booth at the far corner toward the right,” he replied in a low voice so that no one could hear us over the music that was pumped through the cool air. “Do you seriously know who we're looking for?”

“Without a doubt. I'm just not completely sure of the *why* at this point, but I imagine we'll know before the night is out.”

I descended the stairs down to the main floor and strolled back to the booth that Knox had indicated. Lycans and vampires both skirted me as I passed through the crowded region. Everyone knew of Bryce's death by now. Everyone would suspect that I was looking for the killer, and no one wanted to fall under my searching gaze.

The booth consisted of two long benches that ran parallel to each other with a low table in the middle. It was easy to figure out which one of the three women that sat in the booth was Lauren. Her short blond hair and petite figure made her a relatively close physical match to not only Katie, but also the image that I picked out of Franklin's mind. She lifted her blue eyes when I blocked the entrance to the booth, and she didn't at all look surprised to find me standing there with my fists on my hips.

“So, I guess it's safe to say that Franklin failed in his task,” she announced, drawing some confused looks from her companions.

“No, he managed to kill Bryce,” I corrected.

Her bright pink lips twisted into a moue before she coolly corrected my wrong assumption. “He was supposed to kill you, too.”

Her companions gasped and started to move as far from her within the booth as possible before encountering me. I had

wondered if she had worked alone or if any of her companions had helped, but their utter shock and horror was easily picked out of their respective minds. This plot was Lauren's alone.

I shrugged my slim shoulders, frowning at her. "He nearly did, but then, I've survived worse. Why do it? Your life is forfeit for involving the Daylight Coalition, for attempting to kill Knox and me. Why kill Bryce and Katie? Because I wouldn't allow her to be reborn?"

"You stupid bitch!" she exploded, all her rage suddenly rising to the surface to mar her beautiful face. "You think that's all. If it had been simply not allowing her to be reborn, then I would still have Katie. But that wasn't enough for you. You had to have her memory wiped as well. Bryce took her from me!" Lauren's fingers curled into shaking fists and she raised tear-glazed eyes to me.

I was beginning to realize exactly how wrong I had been about this entire situation. Katie had not been Bryce's lover, but Lauren's. Unfortunately, Lauren was too young to bring a human into our world so she convinced Bryce to secretly handle it outside Justin's knowledge.

It was common practice to wipe the memory of any human that had been denied access to our world. It was too risky to leave them walking around with knowledge of our world. In a moment of anger at being rejected, they could strike out and talk to many of the wrong people, spreading knowledge of the nightwalker and even lycanthrope world. I had never considered what would happen to someone who hadn't had that intention but truly had a connection with a nightwalker.

"I'd been with Katie since high school. He took all her memories of me. There was no getting her back. She didn't know me! Didn't remember us!" she moaned.

It was all gut-wrenchingly clear now. Lauren had killed Katie rather than face what she saw as a horrible eternity without her. Katie might not have recognized Lauren, but her appearance was deceptively sweet and innocent. Katie wouldn't have hesitated to open the door. Lauren had gone to the woman's house, broke her neck from behind so that she would feel no pain, then drained her completely dry so that no one else could ever have her blood. Afterward, Lauren lovingly arranged her companion on the floor as if she was simply resting. Sleeping Beauty waiting for her lover's kiss to awaken her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know the situation, but—" I started, but rage had finally overtaken Lauren's grief.

"You're sorry? You ruined our lives!" Putting one high-heeled foot on the table, Lauren pushed off the wall and launched herself at me, her fingers raised toward my face like claws. I tried to sidestep her, but hunger and fatigue had made me slow. Her nails scored four long cuts along my arm and another across my cheek before we crashed through the outer ring of tables. Still struggling, we smashed into the crowd of people on the dance floor. There was a cacophony of cries, curses, and hisses that went up at the collision, but we ignored them all as Lauren worked to regain her feet. Her eyes were locked on me.

Still lying on my back, I swung my leg around into her, knocking her back to the floor. I rose faster than her and slammed my fist into her face, breaking her jaw, before taking a step backward. Lauren howled in pain but still took another blind swipe at me with her long fingernails in hopes of drawing blood again.

Knox stepped in front of me, ready to take over the fight. To my surprise another combatant had jumped into the ring, and I hadn't even noticed her in the nightclub. But then, that was Amanda's special gift. She had a special way of fading into the background so that you didn't immediately notice her there. It made her all the more dangerous.

Amanda had one fist wrapped in Lauren's hair, pulling her head back so that the long expanse of her neck was exposed. Her right hand held Lauren's right arm, twisting it behind her body. Hovering inches from Lauren's throat, Amanda's fangs were poised to tear it out if I so much as blinked my approval.

"Hold," I said, brushing off my hands. "This is Knox's fight."

Amanda frowned, sheathing her fangs for the moment. I knew the look of disappointment. There was a truly heartless, vicious quality about Amanda. She reveled in their pain and the violence that our kind was capable of. Yet it was more than that. While Knox saw to the night-to-night workings of my domain in many ways, Amanda was an enforcer for me among the fledglings. She saw it as her duty to keep the young ones in line, and somehow Lauren had slipped by her. Amanda felt responsible, and now she needed to be a part of Lauren's demise.

"Mira, please." Amanda's plea came out in a wavering whisper.

Slipping my hands into the front pockets of my jeans, I nodded. "Help him clean up." I watched as Amanda and Knox ushered Lauren to a hallway toward the back of the nightclub where they would destroy her in the basement. As the trio disappeared behind a door, Adam appeared at my elbow. With another nod from me, he ushered Kari and Bridgette from the club. There was such a thing as guilt by association in my world. While they may have been innocent, I simply didn't want to look at them.

I settled into the back corner of the empty booth and set my crossed feet on the low table as I waited for Knox. Something twisted in my stomach as I listened to Lauren's screams just under the throbbing beat of the music that had once again started. The dancing seemed a little more frenzied as the occupants of the nightclub either enjoyed the rush from her painful end or fought to block out her death with music and dancing.

Our world was a delicate balancing act. We held these amazing powers in the palms of our hands, but in a moment of carelessness, we could lose everything to the humans that surrounded and outnumbered us. Over the long centuries, we created a series of rules and laws that we all had to abide by, from fledglings to the Elders in the Coven. But I've seen these rules crush those

they were attempting to protect just as frequently as I've seen them save us.

Lauren broke our most sacred rule of never informing a hunter of our existence. Even if she hadn't attempted to have me killed, she would have been dead tonight.

Bishop sat down at the table and handed me a linen tablecloth. With a grateful nod, I pressed it to the line of claw marks Lauren had scored on my right arm. He gazed at the assembled crowd, a frown teasing at the corners of his mouth.

"Didn't quite accomplish what you set out to, did you?" I announced, drawing his gaze back to me.

"I can still take you back to Venice with me," he threatened, his dark eyes narrowing on me.

"No, you can't. I'd never willingly go, but it might have been easier if I had been mentally or emotionally broken by the events here." Drawing a deep breath, I lowered the napkin that was stained with my blood. I was sore and tired from the various fights that had filled my night, but this one was going to be my most dangerous. "Were you the one to introduce Lauren to the Daylight Coalition member or did you handle that all by yourself?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he blandly said.

"Of course you do. You've been in town for months now, watching and listening. I know what's happening in my own domain. Only the urging of someone older and stronger would have gotten a fledgling to actually plot out my death. Involving Justin Ravana's family was a nice touch, though. He never actually contacted the Coven, did he?"

"No," Bishop finally admitted, flashing me a smile full of fangs and menace, as he realized that I had figured out his part in this plot to end my existence. "Fledglings are meant to be used."

"And Ravana?"

"I didn't want to deal with him when I take over your domain."

"Which you get if I go back to the Coven."

"Or simply die."

Bishop lunged across the short distance between us, as he drew a small wooden stake out of his pocket. I grabbed his wrists, but he was bigger and stronger than me, and I was already weak from the night's encounters—something I'm sure he was counting on.

The chunk of wood bit through my flesh as he put his entire body weight behind the stake. Pain lanced through my body as it dug into my chest, grinding closer to my heart as I pushed against him.

A part of me didn't want to kill him. I thought I had known Bishop, but I had been wrong.

"Don't do this," I cried in a pained voice.

"It's too late to plead for your life," he said past gritted teeth.

"I'm not. I'm pleading for yours." Bishop increased the pressure on the stake so that the tip punctured my heart, winning a scream from me. Closing my eyes, I conjured up flames so that they instantly consumed his body. I continued to hold his wrists, trapping him in the booth with me. His screams rose above the music, add their own unique chorus to match Lauren's screams coming from the next room. When he was reduced to ash, I removed the flames and opened my eyes. With a grunt, I pulled the stake from my chest and grabbed the napkin to once again stanch the bleeding.

I looked up in time to see Knox crossing the dance floor toward my booth. Fresh blood was splattered across his clothes and skin. Knox's eyes glowed with an almost frightening light as he stepped back onto the main floor. Dropping the napkin on the table, I slowly pushed from my seat and walked toward him, meeting him in the center of dance floor. Energy vibrated from his slender form, born from the rush of killing another creature in what I was sure was a brutal death. Valerio would have taught him well.

Cupping his head with my right hand, I stepped close and ran my tongue along his neck and up his jaw, drinking in some of Lauren's blood from where it had sprayed across him. A shiver ran the length of his body, and his right arm locked around my waist. "Dear God in heaven, Mira," he uttered in a husky voice. "You can't do that."

I simply chuckled as we began to sway to the beat of the music, his body hardening against mine. Knox tightly wrapped both arms around me, pulling me tight against him as he buried his face in the crook of my neck. His fangs scraped the bare, tender skin there, lifting a sigh from my parted lips.

The murder was solved and the plot to dispose of me had been unraveled. We could relax for a few minutes before the next disaster hit, threatening to tear apart our fragile world. We could afford this moment to forget about it all as we stood safe in our own sanctuary listening to music that pulsed through and around us.

Did she tell Franklin anything else about us? I silently asked after a couple minutes.

Nothing. His right hand squeezed my waist in what was meant to be a reassuring gesture. *Just the address of where to find Bryce and to kill anyone that came to the house that night.*

Barrett and the lycanthropes would see to Franklin. We would need to watch for anyone else during the next few months looking for Franklin or any signs that he had sent information to his companions at the Daylight Coalition. We still weren't out of the woods, but we could see moonlight at the end of this dark journey.

"Bishop?"

“Disposed of.”

After the song ended, I pressed a kiss to Knox’s cheek and started to pull out of his arms, but he stopped me.

“I got a call while you were away looking into Katie Hixson’s murder,” he began, erasing our light moment of relief. “It was from a contact I have up in Cincinnati. She said that a hunter rolled into a town a few days ago looking for you.”

“By name?” I asked. It was extremely rare for anyone to know me by name outside my own domain. Most simply referred to me as Fire Starter. Any hunter that knew of me would know me by that moniker.

“Yes.”

I understood why the call was being made. Knox’s contact was looking for permission to send the hunter my way and get the person out of that domain. A dark grin spread across my face. “Tell your friend to send him my way. I’ll be ready for the hunter.”